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Crappy New Year!

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ALTHOUGH the £180 in first-class rail tickets paid for by the taxpayer and given by David Blunkett to his lover constitute a "clear breach" of parliamentary rules according to the Commons standards and privileges committee, MPs decided not to penalise the lovelorn chap.

What a difference from the case of Metropolitan police officer Supt Ali Dizaei (*Eyes passim*) which took place while Blunkett was Home Secretary. Allegations that Dizaei had overclaimed £270 of travel expenses led to a multi-million pound investigation and a two-year suspension, culminating in a trial at the Old Bailey in September 2003. The charges of "false accounting" were only dropped when it emerged that Supt Dizaei was actually *owed* £4,000 in expenses by the Met. If he had been found guilty he could have been sent to prison.

Further evidence that it's one rule for former home secretaries and another for everyone else can be found in the procedures the armed forces have in place to deal with servicemen and women who pass travel warrants meant for dependants on to unauthorised persons: whether or not they offer to refund the cost of the tickets (as Blunkett did) they face automatic dismissal for fraud.

EVERY MORNING the *Daily Mail* has been printing a roll of honour celebrating the "generous donations from the worlds of commerce and showbusiness" to the paper's flood-aid appeal.

As the *Mail* says, the generosity of rich people is "a remarkable reaffirmation of the human spirit... We salute you all."

Editor Paul Dacre is hoping that none of these celebs noticed a rather less complimentary article only a week before Christmas, headlined "THE £1 SCROOGE TEST". The *Mail* sent pseudonymous £1 cheques to dozens of wealthy people from business and the media to see if they would be mean or greedy enough to bank such a small sum, from a donor of whom they had never heard. Lo and behold, 10 per cent of them did!

As the *Mail* concluded at the time, after 1,500 words of gleeful prose mocking the tightwads: "They may already be rich beyond most people's dreams, but as Ebenezer Scrooge might have counselled, every pound matters – wherever it comes from."

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ABC

"Father, I have called for an independent inquiry"

EARLIER this year a special order of the Privy Council overturned a High Court ruling allowing the former inhabitants of the British-owned island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean the right to return to their homeland.

The islanders had been forcibly deported in the 1960s to make way for an American airbase. One of the reasons given by Foreign Office minister Bill Rammell for the decision was that "Diego Garcia and the Chagos archipelago are at risk from global warming". Any permanent re-settlement, argued Rammell, would put the islanders at risk of being submerged by rising sea levels.

Last week both British and US official sources reported that the vast tsunami waves that engulfed Indian Ocean countries from Indonesia to the Maldives left Diego Garcia and its outlying islands "relatively unscathed". As Diego Garcia is considerably closer to the epicentre of the quake than the Maldives, it can only mean one thing... that it is one of the safest areas for low-lying habitation in the whole Indian Ocean!

THE MAIN reassurance over foundation hospitals given to rebellious MPs by health secretary John Reid last year was the establishment of a powerful independent regulator.

One of the regulator's main jobs would be to make sure that foundation hospitals didn't borrow too much, as doing so would give them an unfair advantage in the competition for scarce resources such as qualified staff, thereby accelerating the emergence of a "two-tier" health system. Furthermore, excessive debt might land an unsuccessful hospital in the kind of financial mess that one of the first wave of foundation hospitals, Bradford, now finds itself in.

In this spirit the new regulator, Bill Moyes, issued some "prudential guidelines" that generally limited foundation hospitals' borrowings to 10 percent of their assets. Only a few months after the launch of the initiative, however, the hospitals are unimpressed by such a constraint and have requested that the limit be increased to 25 percent.

Mr Moyes is likely to oblige. He tells the *Guardian:* "We are sympathetic to their views." The new relaxed approach to debt will delight the banks, who will be queuing up to lend to hospitals that the government can't afford to let go bust. Among those banks will be HBOS (formerly Halifax and Bank of Scotland), a big health service financier through several PFI deals. Coincidentally, HBOS owns British Linen Bank, itself a PFI banker and the former employer of Bill Moyes for several years after he successfully promoted private finance for hospitals at the Scottish Office in the late 1990s.

Whether rebellious Labour MPs would have been bought off in the foundation hospital debate if they had known how quickly the rules would be eased will never be known, but once again the winners are ... the bankers.

Number crunchings

1 hr 45 mins
■ Time it took Tony Blair to comment publicly on death of John Peel.

2 hrs
■ Time it took Tony Blair to comment publicly on death of Jill Dando.

3 hrs 20 mins
■ Time it took Tony Blair to comment publicly on death of Princess Diana.

7 hrs
■ Time it took Tony Blair to comment publicly on death of Frank Sinatra.

12 hrs
■ Time it took Tony Blair to comment publicly on death of George Harrison.

4 days
■ Time it took Tony Blair to comment publicly on deaths of tens of thousands of tsunami victims.

Street of Shame

"EXCLUSIVE: We find mum who ran into killer wave to save her family," bellowed the front page of the *News of the World* a week after the tsunami.

"The brave bikini-clad mum pictured running INTO the sea as a giant tsunami thundered towards her children is ALIVE, the *News of the World* can reveal."

And how did the *Screws*, not known for its coverage of northern Sweden, manage to track down "miracle mum" Karin Svärd and her family to her home in Skelleftehamn? They, er, found her in Stockholm's *Expressen* newspaper, along with a number of pictures which they ran uncredited across three pages – unlike other British newspapers which were rather more honest about their own versions of the "exclusive".

THE TSUNAMI disaster seems to have gone unnoticed in the *Daily Telegraph*'s advertising department.

Three days after the waves retreated, with the death toll standing at 60,000 and rising and most of the *Telegraph*'s news section devoted to the devastation left behind, the paper's front page was inviting readers to "Have your DAMP PROBLEM solved the clean, green way! Although you rarely see this hidden enemy approaching, winning the war against condensation, rising damp, and mould can prove troublesome and costly, but not with the Schrijver Systeem®."

Over on the paper's website things were not much better. Their "targeted advertising" system, which selects products according to key words in news stories, decided that a suitable accompaniment to the tsunami coverage was an enticement to "relax with a soothing Ocean Waves CD".

"AT THE TIME of writing the British public has donated £60m to the various charity hotlines set up in aid of the victims of the tsunami that devastated southeast Asia," observed Rod Liddle in his *Sunday Times* column.

"Where did this sudden magnanimity come from? ...the disaster occurred in a part of the world that is familiar to many of us and for which we feel affection and even affinity... it was as if part of us – a nice part – was washed away by that tsunami."

And indeed, only last January Liddle was on the Malaysian island of Langkawi marrying his long-term partner Rachel Royce in a lavish Islamic wedding ceremony. Or maybe the "nice part" of himself which he had in mind was the part where he flew home early from the honeymoon to meet his mistress, 22-year-old Alicia Monckton, an incident which he has recounted at length in the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Spectator*, *The Times*, *Sunday Times* and *GQ*.

HERE IS the lead paragraph from an unsigned piece about nanotechnology in the New Year issue of the *Economist*:

"Not long ago Ella Standage was woken by a bad dream about nanobots. She was terrified that nanoscale machines might replicate uncontrollably and turn the entire planet into grey goo. Ms Standage is not the only one to worry about such imaginary horrors, but at least she has an excuse: she is only four years old."

She has another excuse, which goes unmentioned: not every four-year-old's dreams are influenced by being the daughter of Tom Standage, technology editor of the *Economist*.

THE SIMON HOGGART AFFAIR

AMONG the "little lads" whose lives have been blighted by the Blunkett scandal are the fraternity of parliamentary sketch-writers, including Simon Hoggart of the *Guardian* and Quentin Letts of the *Daily Mail*. For years they have got together every afternoon over a cup of tea to compare jokes, but when parliament reassembles any encounter between Hoggart and Letts may require the attendance of riot police and the St John's Ambulance service.

The trouble began with the revelation that Hoggart was yet another of Kimberly Quinn's paramours. Since Hoggart had recently published a jokey book about Christmas round-robin letters, Letts dashed off a feature for the *Mail* imagining what the *Grauniad* hack might say in his own seasonal circular. ("You will understand, perhaps, why our festive card this year does not feature any scene of a baby in a manger. Nor Three Wise Men...")

As soon as this appeared, on the morning of 21 December, Letts received a blistering email from *Grauniad* political editor Michael White, who has been acting as Hoggart's adviser and spokesman. "I have tried for years to persuade Simon that you are a shifty little cunt whom he should not trust," he wrote. "But he's a nice guy. Now, as if we didn't need further proof of his erratic judgment, along comes your parody, shitty and shifty, of his round-robin book." Noting Letts's reputation as a media tart, White concluded with some avuncular advice: "When some toerag at the office asks you to betray a friend and colleague, even if it's for money, you don't have to do it. No need to reply."

But reply he did – and in print. Two days later, as stories appeared suggesting that the mighty Quinn had kept a diary, Letts wrote a two-page spoof for the *Mail* imagining what might be in it. After a further dig at Hoggart ("'Simon Hoggart, you are insatiable!' I exclaimed with a girlish gasp), the mock-diary continued: "Those *Guardian* guys – they're just so sweet I could eat them... The other day I came across Hoggart's colleague, political editor Michael White. An authoritarian little pencil moustache to go with a champagne socialist house in France. Now, he could be my type. I feel positively itchy for more."

No Christmas truce there, then. Only a few weeks ago Simon Hoggart, Michael White and Quentin Letts all shared a long and agreeable lunch as fellow-judges of the Parliamentarian of the Year awards for, er, *The Spectator*. If they are all judges in 2005, postal ballots may be necessary.

PS Kimberly's spoof diary, as imagined by Letts, also had her drooling over former *Telegraph* chief executive Dan Colson ("he wanted to fix dinner so he could 'look over one or two figures' and 'talk options'") and newsreader Sir Trevor McDonald ("Trev, you can bing my bongs any day you like"). A far-fetched notion, surely, even for so dedicated a trouser-chaser as Kimberly. No wonder the *Mail* was quick to stress that these diary entries were "completely imaginary".

THE RELATIVE obscurity of Simon Hoggart, the "third man" in Kimberly Quinn's busy love life, came as something of a disappointment to the newspapers which had been joyfully speculating about "veteran journalists" and "household names".

The *Sun*, most of whose readers are unfamiliar with the *Guardian* and *The Spectator*, had to make do with describing him "a posh journalist... who appears on BBC2's *Grumpy Old Men*".

But obscurity need not be a hindrance to scandal, as one columnist pointed out in October 2002. "The news that it was John Leslie who was the subject of allegations made by Ulrika was greeted round the country with a great cry of 'Who?' We'd perhaps assumed from the tabloids that the name would be an incredibly famous and wildly improbable figure, such as Wogan or Paxman. But I suspect that doesn't matter... gossip can be every bit as fascinating if we haven't even heard of the victims... it is such a demanding and perverse human need that we can enjoy it about anyone at all."

The columnist in question was of course the *Grauniad*'s Simon Hoggart, whose first reaction when he found himself the subject of gossip in the *News of the Screws* was to describe it, rather erroneously, as "horrid, vile bullshit".

He has at least managed to retain his job as the presenter of Radio 4's *News Quiz*, despite the BBC's sacking of his TV counterpart Angus Deayton from *Have I Got News For You* after his own failure to keep his sex life out of the headlines. At the time Hoggart professed himself outraged, though not for the obvious reasons. "If I wanted to have a champagne-swilling cocaine-fuelled sex romp in a top class luxury hotel with a £1,000 a night vice girl, it would require my fee for at least an entire series of *The News Quiz*," he wrote in the *Guardian* in 2002. "It doesn't leave much over for cocaine-fuelled sex with upmarket prostitutes, though I suppose a knee-trembler near King's Cross might be within the price range."

The Spectator's offices in Doughty Street are of course just down the road from King's Cross station... although as the magazine's wine correspondent, Hoggart was clever enough to ensure that Kimberly paid *him* for his services.

PIERS "Morgan" Moron's new column in the London *Evening Standard* is already proving a major embarrassment, as *Standard* executives have realised too late that a disgraced ex-editor is perhaps not best placed to sit in judgment on others.

Yet Piers just can't stop himself. As we noted in the last *Eye*, his debut column on 14 December was a rant against Geoff Hoon, described by Moron as "an ultimate shameless opportunist" with a "world-class brass neck... a world-class stupidity" and a "chinless smirk", a man with "a rare ability to ensure that whatever goes wrong is never ever his fault" even when his claims are "exposed as rubbish" *(sic, sic, sic)*.

Now he has topped that with a column about Simon Hoggart's extra-marital fling with Kimberly Quinn. "It always amuses me," he chortles, "how journalists usually behave exactly like the hypocritical, lying politicians we love to slaughter when caught up in scandals ourselves."

How true. Many Moron-watchers will remember his blustering, outraged reaction when he was quizzed about walking out on his pregnant wife. Some may also recall how he behaved when it was suggested that his mistress, *Grauniad* diarist Marina Hyde, was still living Fortier-style with her husband. When Andrew Pierce of *The Times* inquired about this strange story, Moron warned: "You're invading my privacy, you cunt, and I'll invade yours if you write about that."

No wonder Piers feels qualified to pronounce on Quinn's "drama of duplicity".

"That's what we need: more old-style coppers!"

"IF YOU SHARE my disgusting voyeuristic tendencies, nothing warms your cockles like a nice, juicy sex scandal," frothed Vanessa Feltz in the *Daily Star* last week, reminding her readers in the wake of the Blunkett-Quinn-Hoggart affair that 2004 had been the "year of the bonkbuster!" "Whether it's a little light rumpy pumpy or a full-scale extra curricular love fest, every immoral – preferably illegal – grunt and groan is meat and drink to a newspaper columnist."

It was presumably a different Vanessa Feltz who sobbed in December 1999, after newspapers revealed that her husband had been indulging in some extra-curricular rumpy-pumpy, that: "We felt ambushed. It was scary, we were exposed, intruded upon… I'm in pain, in absolute physical pain… I am so distressed and wounded I can't describe it in words. I am so worried about my children I don't know what to do. They are as wounded as I am. They are in total shock, they're so, so sad, it's as if they're blinded by grief and bashing into walls and doors."

***DAILY TELEGRAPH* diarist Celia Walden appears to be biting back after the *Eye*'s recent observations about her timidity. Just before Christmas she ran a picture story about artists Gilbert and George being closet Tories. "People have always thought that we are liberal, when in fact we are conservative," the couple told her. "We're monarchists and fervent admirers of Mrs Thatcher."**

This is brave stuff, since it has long been a running joke on the *Telegraph* diary that Gilbert and George are the alter egos of Sir David and Sir Frederick Barclay, the paper's new owners. The gag began on 23 November 1999, when the then diary editor Sam Leith wrote: "Am I the only person to have noticed the sinister similarity between that pair of reclusive, eccentric performance artists who style themselves 'The Barclay Brothers' and the shrewd business duo Gilbert and George? Are they somehow in cahoots?"

The Barclays, who are notoriously prickly about gossip columns, were not amused.

> A Nov. 17 graphic on President Bush's Cabinet misspelled the name of Margaret Spellings, his nominee for education secretary.
>
> *Washington Post*

A YEAR after the *Daily Express* reprinted an old piece about Arabs by columnist Robert Kilroy-Silk without noticing, it appears still to be the case that no one bothers to read the paper before it goes to press.

On 27 December the paper's "star" columnist, ex-defence minister Sir John Nott, observed that "the search is on for Kimberly Quinn's fourth lover". He predicted that the name was bound to be printed soon since "news is sparse over the Christmas holidays". This was on the day that all the papers, including the *Express*, were full of news of the tsunami disaster. Meanwhile a large headline on page 17 – six pages before Nott's column – announced that "wealthy Labour peer is named the fourth man in Blunkett love tangle".

"SCHOOLS are to be ordered to teach children key dates in British history in response to concern that youngsters have little knowledge of their country's past," reported the *Sunday Telegraph* on 26 December, but it would seem that this ignorance is not confined to the under-18s.

In a brief "test your knowledge" feature the paper managed not just to assign the date of 1215 to something called "Magna Carter", but also assured readers that odd one out in the following list – "Elizabeth I, Charles I, Charles II, Oliver Cromwell" was not the only non-monarch on the list but the more imaginative "Elizabeth I – 1600s, others 1500s".

HACKWATCH

Tony Parsons

AFTER Lynda Lee-Potter's death, most newspapers echoed the *Daily Mail*'s verdict that she was "irreplaceable". Surely no other columnist could ever have quite such an obsession with other people's fat bums or sagging stomachs?

Not so. It is now three years since the *Eye* identified Tony Parsons as the new Glenda Slagg. A glance through his more recent output shows that he is ready and willing to take on the mantle…

17 May 2004. Parsons is disgusted by the photos from Abu Ghraib jail. "I can understand," he admits, "that a stressed-out British squaddie might give someone who could be his sworn enemy a good hiding." The torturers of Abu Ghraib, however, are not handsome Brits but ugly Americans – "pig-faced women and fat-bellied men". Ugh!

31 May. Ugh again?!? "The first time I went to America, in 1978, I was shocked at their rhino-sized, all-American butts," Parsons recalls. "Here was the home of the big butt, the land of the lard tub. And now we have caught up with the Americans." The week before the 60th anniversary of D-Day, he thinks of all those strapping lads who fought for freedom and a land fit for heroes. "And what do we build in their honour? A land fit for greedy, fat bastards."

14 June. The English football fans at Euro 2004 – don'tcha love 'em?! They have proved that the flag of St George is no longer the exclusive preserve of "fat-bellied, shaven-headed beer monsters".

21 June. English fans at Euro 2004 – aren'tcha sick of 'em?! "It is difficult to believe that in little more than half a century, the average male has changed from selfless warrior fighting for freedom to tattooed beer monster…" *(You've done this. – Ed.)*

5 July. Why is England so crap at sport? Because we don't have traditional school sports days any more! "Bring back sports day," Parsons pleads. "Bring back getting the fat little bastards to run around in the fresh air for one day a year."

12 July. At last, the yoof of England gets a break as Tony turns his attention to photos of Gwyneth Paltrow in a backless dress. A "fine-looking wench", he concedes, and certainly not fat – but marred by "repulsive blotches" on her skin. "Yuk. Only a wimpy British pop star could love her."

19 July. Another American pin-up has let herself go. "Podgy, blotchy, spotty, dumpy, ugly – a description of Britney Spears sounds like a roll call of the seven dwarves." Yet Sharon Stone, who at 46 is 24 years older than Britney, remains "a dreamboat, a blonde bombshell, a true sex goddess". How to explain the difference? "Sharon – who will soon be flashing her trimmed crotch in *Basic Instinct 2* – is making an effort, while Britney is making none."

9 August. Glenda Parsons casts his expert eye over the *femme fatale* of the Football Association. "Pushing 40, Faria Alam is unloved, alone and – if not exactly a painted lady – then certainly a tainted woman. What man would want to be in the same bed as her?"

23 August. Here's Tony's summer sizzler – Sharron Davies, with her reports from the Olympics! "Now that's what I call ample coverage," he drools. But now BBC spoilsports have deprived viewers of "her magnificent nipples, quivering with emotion in the Mediterranean sunshine" by showing sexy Sharron in head-and-shoulders shots – "and this after just three lousy complaints about her nipple-tight tank tops". Stop the cover-up now! "I don't know about you, but Sharron Davies has completely revived my adolescent interest in the breaststroke." Geddit?!

30 August. Come off it, Mister Newsman – leave Mark Thatcher alone! OK, so he has a "bloated, pompous face", but "we should not relish kicking a man when he is down – even a man as loathsome as Mark Thatcher…How cruel and petty we have become." *(Start being cruel and petty again or you're fired. – Ed.)*

6 September. "I recently spent an hour or so in the company of a fat, sweaty lady from the *Daily Telegraph*," Parsons reveals. "She was somewhat cross-eyed…When her piece appeared, she spent a large part of it complaining about my physical appearance. She even took issue with the air in my house. But it smelled OK until she turned up." *(That's more like it. – Ed.)*

27 September. Since Jordan and Jodie Marsh are "empty-headed chavs with brains slightly smaller than their cup sizes", we expect them to have boob jobs. But now everyone's doing it! A 22-year-old law student called Sian Mansell has even had silicone implants inserted in her calves to make her legs sexier. A waste of time, Parsons reckons: "She is never going to be Cindy Crawford – so get over it, dear…What kind of woman blows 10 grand on calf implants? A silly cow."

1 November. Hark at Cherie Blair, a-moanin' and a-groanin' about the Allerednic syndrome. (That's Cinderella backwards, stoopid!) So she can't think of anything worse than a life of domestic drudgery? "I can, Cherie," Parsons writes. "How about being a career woman with a crap book, a mouth like a letterbox and an arse the size of Kent?"

15 November. Why are so many middle-aged women having cosmetic surgery, such as Anne Robinson and that "borderline boiler" Sharon Osbourne? "Whatever happened to the realisation that even the most well-preserved flesh must one day start to head south of the border? … Let me live in a world where you are not obliged to look like a sex machine during the menopause." *(Except for Sharon Stone, surely? – Ed.)*.

29 November. Here she is – Tony's autumn sizzler from *I'm a Celebrity…*! "It has to be Sophie Anderton. I am getting on the phone and I am not going to stop voting until Sophie is the queen of the jungle. What red-blooded male didn't melt when Sophie sighed: 'Nothing can be more revolting than a testicle in your mouth'? She bit into those kangaroo nuts as if she was born to it… Sophie has pluck and spunk. A face like a Roman coin and a body built for hot love." Phew!

6 December. Forget Sophie Anderton – the person who "won our hearts in the jungle" was Joe Pasquale. Crazy name, crazy guy!?! "At 43, an age when most comedians are marrying their lapdancers, getting fat and getting boring, Joe Pasquale is just getting started… He is funny, but also soft, warm, scatty." And, no doubt, built for hot love! But there's a thumbs-down for another telly star, Anne Robinson – a "cosmetically-enhanced hag", a "60-year-old slapper" and an "old bag".

13 December. So Camilla Parker-Bowles has been shopping in an antiquarian bookshop!? "I am a big fan of second-hand bookshops myself," Tony quips. "That slightly musty smell, everything a bit crumpled around the edges and all those mysterious, unidentifiable stains. A lot like Camilla, really." Geddit!?!

27 December. Writing about surprise Christmas best-sellers, Tony recalls the success of Lynne Truss's *Eats Shoots and Leaves* last year. "Lynne had been knocking around for years, writing novels nobody wanted to read, and was affectionately known in the business as 'the woman who lives with a cat because she looks like a dog'. But we all loved her to bits…" So *that's* the secret behind all those other gratuitous insults: they're just Tony's way of expressing affection, stoopid!?!

3 January 2005. A *Mirror* editorial says that if Tony Blair had returned early from holiday because of the tsunami, he would have been accused of cheapening a tragedy for his own political purposes. "Yet the people who would have complained most loudly about him are now screeching that he has been failing in his duty by *not* dashing home from holiday." One such screecher is Glenda Parsons, who writes a vitriolic open letter to the PM: "You had a chance to show your compassion and humanity and Christianity. And you couldn't be arsed." While thousands were dying, he thunders, Blair simply "rubbed some more Ambre Solaire on his wife's gigantic behind". Yup, even a global tragedy can't stand in the way of a certain Parsonian obsession. Couldn't be arsed – geddit?!?

TONY BLAIR'S new election supremo, Alan Milburn, is determined to start the New Year as he means to go on – by enraging Gordon Brown and John Prescott with plans to "privatise" healthcare for the elderly by obliging pensioners to use a complicated voucher system to access services.

With the full backing of the Dear Leader, Milburn wants to promote the voucher system for oldies as an eye-catching initiative for inclusion in Labour's general election manifesto. Pensioners would use their vouchers to "purchase" services such as meals-on-wheels, transport and long-term care from a range of providers, instead of relying on local authorities.

One Labour election strategist informed the *Daily Telegraph*: "What Milburn wants is a big row in the New Year to show the electorate he is prepared to occupy Tory territory and that 'New' Labour has not run out of steam. Milburn and Blair want the recent 'New' Labour reshuffles, which have put Blairites in pole positions, to be followed by the 'New' Labour manifesto."

Could this be the same Alan Milburn who kicked up such a fuss when, as an opposition health spokesman, he vehemently opposed the introduction of pay-to-view TV in hospital wards – claiming that this "would be the thin end of the wedge and open the floodgates to privatisation"? Indeed it could.

THE Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) comes into force this month, but anyone who has been patiently waiting to get their hands on facts about Britain's secretive investigative organisations will be disappointed.

The blanket "absolute exemption" from the act for crime-fighting agencies, such as the National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) and the National Crime Squad (NCS), under the mantle of "security matters", has always been a little fishy, since organised crime is only rarely a matter of national security. Ordinary policing, after all, will be covered only by a qualified exemption which will allow them to withhold information about cases during investigations or pending trials.

Invented after the act was passed and swallowing up both NCIS and NCS, the Serious Organised Crime Agency (Soca) will inherit their exemption. However, Soca is also to take in the intelligence gathering arm of Customs & Excise and the Home Office's investigation of organised immigration crime – areas which previously *were* subject to freedom of information requests from the public. So what is given with one hand is instantly taken away with the other!

Number Crunchings

£50m ■ Amount of aid Britain has pledged in aid for tsunami victims

£520m ■ Amount Britain put aside in last month's pre-budget report for military activities in Iraq

"NEW" LABOUR party chiefs in the Midlands are celebrating yet another local stitch-up with the selection of Robert Flello in the safe seat of Stoke-on-Trent South, where George Stevenson MP is retiring.

According to local rag, *The Sentinel*, Flello miraculously managed to mail postcards to the dwindling band of local members from the Brighton conference back in September. Flello wrote that he "was arguing the case for Stoke-on-Trent South and making a lot of progress!" This was some feat, since Flello could only have sent his Brighton missives with the aid of a membership list – and none of the other hopefuls managed to lay their hands on such a list until November, when the selection process was already underway. Even Flello's pisspoor performance in front of the members – he mumbled his way through a prepared speech, reciting local street names – wasn't enough to derail the "new" Labour bandwagon

THE rock-solid seat of Blaenau Gwent, formerly Ebbw Vale, produced Labour giants such as Aneurin Bevan and Michael Foot, with giant majorities to match. In the coming general election, however, "new" Labour may be lucky to hang on to the seat.

The party's official candidate, Maggie Jones, is a Unison official and Blairista, who won the selection after the comrades were obliged to choose their candidate from an all-wimmin shortlist (*Eyes passim*). Such was the outcry that a number of constituency officers announced that they would instead be offering their services to the nearby marginal Monmouth constituency, while the Labour Welsh Assembly member for Blaenau Gwent, Peter Law, hinted that he might run as an independent. Now that hint has turned into a racing certainty, and all bets are off. There is an added headache for "new" Labour chiefs – the party only has a majority of one in the Welsh Assembly. As soon as Law goes public with his decision to run in Blaenau Gwent, he will automatically be expelled from the party – and bang goes Labour's control of the Assembly.

PS. Back in 1997 Labour party bosses fixed the parliamentary selection in the safe seat of Newport East for former Tory minister Alan Howarth. Now that Howarth has announced his retirement they are up to their old tricks again. This time the seat is to be earmarked for the thoroughly on-message general-secretary of the Wales Labour Party, Jessica Morden. Or rather Morden will be able to earmark the seat for herself, given that she has what all the other wannabes won't have – a list of the members!

"Through our condom rollback we are trying to illustrate that protection against infection is easy, even more affordable and accessible," said Asda director Tony Page.

Edinburgh Evening News

CARPET-BAGGING special adviser Richard Olzweski's hopes of being selected as Labour's candidate in North Ayrshire have come horribly unstuck.

This is despite – or because of – the "helpful interventions" of his boss, John Reid, in attempting to persuade the comrades to vote for his sidekick at the Department of Health. Olzweski was defeated by left-wing trade unionist Katy Clark – so out go any hopes that this particular servant of the people will land himself a safe berth north of the border this side of the general election.

LABOUR MPs in marginal seats are being invited to a series of "key seat" campaign briefings with party whips and organisers. Unless of course they are deemed "off message" – in which case they aren't asked.

Special campaigning advice and other support is being prepared for those who continue to suck up to the Dear Leader, while others, especially members of the awkward squad Campaign Group of Labour MPs, are being left to their own devices. Who ever said that the Dear Leader's party had become a cult?

NUCLEAR generating outfit British Energy, privatised in 1996, has nevertheless since swallowed hundreds of millions of pounds of public money to keep it alive.

The company has just come through a major restructuring after being brought to its knees by £5.6bn of debt. Control has gone to BE's major creditors – big banks and bondholders – while the small investors who backed the privatisation end up with just 2.5 percent.

The winners from the deal were – naturally – the directors with bumper pay packages, and the bankers, lawyers and accountants who trousered more than £100m in fees between them. Among the big earners, with more than £10m, were advisers appointed by the department of trade and industry as it sought to protect the public interest in the whole affair.

The bank chosen by the DTI was Credit Suisse First Boston (CSFB), whose record on major government restructurings is somewhat less than impressive. Just two years ago the national audit office reported that the national air traffic service (Nats) partial-privatisation the year before had left the new body with an inadequate financial structure which, combined with loss of business following 9/11, led to a government bail-out only a few months later. The financial whizz-kids behind the Nats privatisation were… CSFB.

THEIR Lordships have been warming up for likely future debate on a national ban on smoking in pubs, by falling out over what to permit in their own bars.

From 10 January, a new set of rules from the Lords' administration and works committee will ban smoking in the Dining Room, the Bishops' Bar and the Barry Room. Puffing peers will be left only the Guest Room, the Truro Room and their own offices (should all occupants of the room agree to permit it).

Not everyone is happy, however. Baroness Howarth wants the ban extended to the Guest Room, while cancer specialist Baroness Finlay of Llandaff has made it plain that she will be content with nothing less than a total ban on smoking in the Palace of Westminster. Meanwhile, those clinging to the tradition of enjoying a smoke with their pint, such as Lords Palmer and Monson, will have to head for the nearby pubs while they still can.

AT LAST a senior minister has owned up to the motives behind the Iraqi intervention.

Replying to a constituent whose nephew is serving in Basra, Alistair Darling writes: "The decision to deploy troops was taken on military grounds in order to support operations designed to bring about the terrorist activity in parts of Iraq. Whatever your views on Iraq, I believe it is important that we see this through…"

NEW YEAR HONOURS SPECIAL

TONY BLAIR'S spokesman said "a key aim" of the New Year Honours "has been to reward those who work and serve at the sharp end – people who have really changed things, or who have given outstanding service to others in difficult situations". How very true that is. People such as...

Captains of industry

John Clare, £694,000-a-year chief executive of Dixons gets a CBE – clearly all is forgiven since the office of fair trading criticised Dixons' extended warranty rip-offs. These were sold through tax haven companies, closed down by the chancellor in 2002.

Stuart Doughty, chief exec of construction company Costain becomes Commander, Order of St Michael and St George (CMG). Doughty caused outrage in March 2003 when he appealed for all the juicy reconstruction work in Iraq to go to companies from coalition countries, bypassing the UN. "If you go down the UN route, that means you go to the world to get the best price... Let's ensure that those who have been violently against this conflict don't share in the reconstruction."

Tony Denunzio, the £741,000-a-year boss of Asda, gets a CBE. Asda is one of those companies suing the government for repayment of tax through the notorious GLOs – group litigation orders (*Eyes passim*).

Services to PFI

A CBE goes to **Alison King**, Tory leader of Norfolk council. Despite having to drop Jarvis from a PFI project for 40 schools, causing delays of at least two years, she insists PFI remains "the only option".

Chris Lendrum took home £868,000 from his director's job at Barclay's until retiring in December with a £3.5m pension fund. Blair has rewarded Lendrum's work funding PFI schemes and selling credit cards with a CBE.

Keith Manson Miller, chief exec of Miller group, gets the CBE. His company won the contract to flog off surplus NHS estate.

And another CBE for **Dr Wendy Thompson**, head of "public sector reform" (ie plugging PFI) at the Cabinet Office.

Services to accountancy

Knight Grand Cross for **Sir Bryan Nicholson**, chairman of the Financial Reporting Council, the government accountancy regulator which ushered in various ineffectual codes in response to the Enron and Equitable Life scandals, much to the relief of British beancounters.

Outgoing Lord Mayor of London **Robert Finch** – a Linklaters lawyer who lobbied Patricia Hewitt to dilute demands that directors be liable for fraud, post-Enron, is knighted. Labour may also have a soft spot for Finch because he helped sell the Millennium Dome and occasionally promotes PFI.

A knighthood for **Derek Wanless**, chief exec Natwest during the 1990s – its tax-avoiding and pension mis-selling heyday.

Defenders of the Realm

General **Larry Johnson** retired this year as the UK head of US arms firm General Dynamics. He helped General Dynamics win the "Bowman" contract for army radios. In December the army and General Dynamics went into crisis talks as tank crews bound for Iraq found the system was riddled with faults, days before General Johnson got his CBE. **Graham Cole**, chief lobbyist for military helicopter firm GKN gets a CBE; **Paul Benson**, boss of high tech military company Ultra Electronics and **David Findlay** of army truck maker Automotive Technik get OBEs. An MBE goes to **Archibald Walker**, Halliburton head of "government operations" after the US firm won contracts to supply tank transporters and run bases for the MOD.

Order of the cock-up

Labour seems as keen as ever on rewarding failure. **John Gieve,** permanent secretary at the Home Office during the Blunkett "nannygate" scandal gets a knighthood; **Richard Bowker**, boss of the defunct and ineffective Strategic Rail Authority picks up a CBE and the award of "Commander of the Order of Bath" goes to **Douglas Smith** not long after he resigned as chief exec of the Child Support Agency, following its spectacular computer failures.

David Fillingham, gets a CBE for his work as director of the "NHS Modernisation Agency" – despite its £230m budget and 700 staff this New Labour quango was scrapped in 2004, only three years after its foundation. **David Brummell** becomes a Companion of the Order of Bath for his work in the Attorney General's office on the iffy legal advice on Iraq.

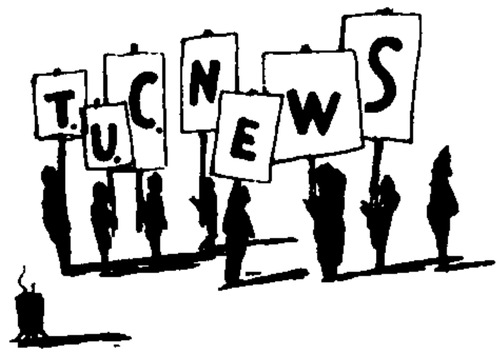
The Prime Minister's spokesman highlighted the knighthood for an "enormous contribution to the fight against terrorism" awarded to Met Police assistant commissioner **David Veness**. This contribution memorably included sending tanks to Heathrow in the run-up to the Iraq war. While Veness oversaw many security alerts – such as the Ricin plot – there have been few successful prosecutions for terrorism.

Just Say No award

OBEs awarded for "really changing things" include a CBE for **Lady Sylvia Jay** of the Food and Drink Federation She worked hard resisting complaints about obesity, excess salt and junk food advertising directed at her industry. An OBE goes to **Martin Couchman**, deputy director of the British Hospitality Association. Couchman is best known for campaigning to keep Britain's "opt out" from the European Union 48 hour working week , so hotel, bar and restaurant staff can serve the community all hours God sends.

Order of the Brown Nose

Mrs Thatcher's personal assistant **Mark Worthington** gets an OBE for devoted service to the woman who is the current prime minister's constant inspiration.



ONE OF Tony Blair's first tasks of the New Year is to try and get his name taken off a race discrimination claim being backed by the GMB trade union (which is of course affiliated to the Labour party).

Under its former general-secretary John Edmonds the GMB supported the efforts of one of its members, Andy McGivern, who wanted to join the Labour party. Because he lives in Northern Ireland, McGivern was refused membership until the prospect of an embarrassing day in court forced Labour to back down and permit him (and anyone else in Ulster of like mind) to join.

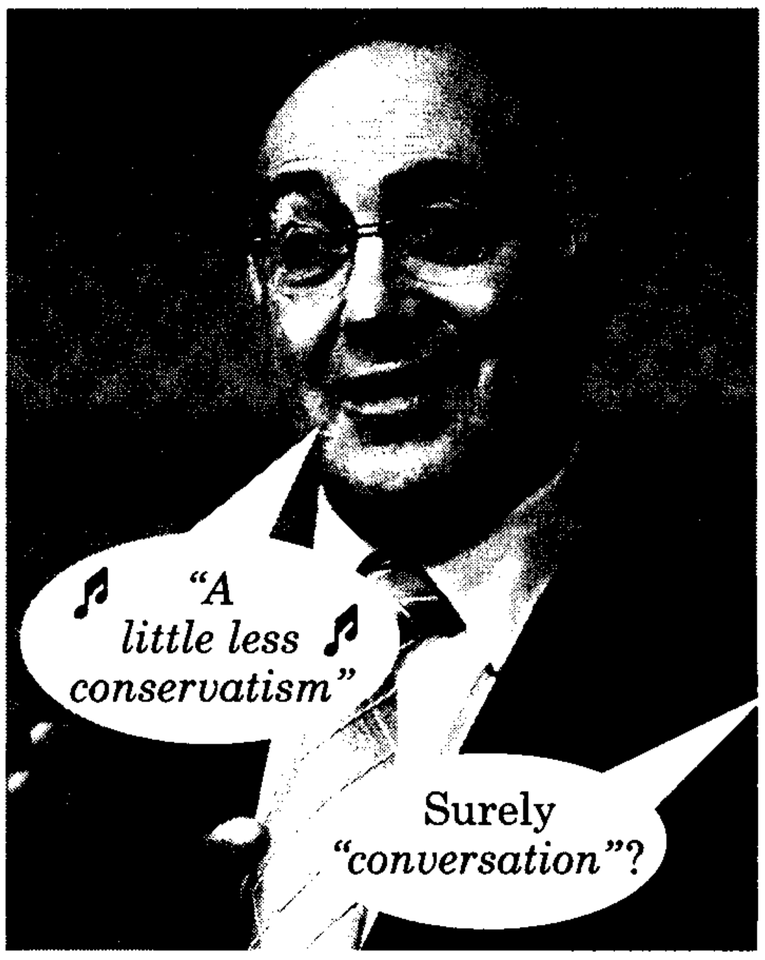
However, the party has continued to refuse to allow its (not very many) new members in the province to set up constituency associations. Indeed, Northern Ireland has been airbrushed from the party's "Labour in your area" map, although the Isle of Man *is* included.

Aided by Edmonds's successor Kevin Curran, McGivern has turned once more to m'learned friends. Papers have been lodged in the central London county court accusing Blair, party chairman Ian McCartney and general secretary Matt Carter of race discrimination.

Blair's lawyers – and he knows a few – are expected to try and get his name removed as a co-defendant, on the grounds that the case is nothing to do with him personally but with the National Executive Committee of the Labour party. Unfortunately, as the Labour website puts it, "The NEC is structured so as to represent all key stakeholders in the party. As at September 2004 its membership is: Leader Tony Blair MP..." and so on.

There must therefore be a strong chance that the claim will proceed with all three defendants required to explain themselves in court. Being found guilty of racial discrimination against the entire population of Northern Ireland would be fairly embarrassing at a time when Blair is introducing legislation to combat religious discrimination. Should the racial discrimination case fail for any reason, there's always the Human Rights Act for the GMB and McGivern to fall back on. And if Blair needs the name of a good human rights lawyer, Matrix chambers are believed to have a few...

TORIES PICK NEW ELVIS THEME TUNE



Number crunchings

£50m ■ Aid money British government has pledged to Indian Ocean countries including Indonesia

£650m ■ Export credit guarantee money British government has paid out in last six years for failed arms deals to Indonesia

JOINED-UP GOVERNMENT

ON 16 DECEMBER the Department of Health issued a press release boasting of the Government's success in getting smokers to kick the habit. "The new figures in the General Household Survey show that there has been a reduction of 400,000 smokers within the last year," it declared, adding that the proportion of the adult population who smoke had declined to 25 per cent in 2003.

This must have come as a surprise to anyone who read a press release headed "No overall change in smoking or drinking", issued by the Office of National Statistics the very same day. "In 2003," it revealed, "26 per cent of adults aged 16 or over in Great Britain smoked cigarettes, the same as in 2002, according to the latest findings of the General Household Survey."

TV

Prospects for 2005 (all channels)

EVEN if the contents of the news bulletins hadn't made the rest of the schedules seem a trivial indulgence, television would have been in trouble this Christmas. Another 1.5 million viewers went awol, lost to DVDs, computer games and digital alternatives. If The Queen was a sit-com rather than a monarch, she'd come back next December in a totally new format fronted by Graham Norton.

So the New Year outlook for all the channels is bleak. Here are the particular nightmares in the in-trays.

BBC1: Although some Tessa-impressers are in the works ahead of charter renewal (including the latest Poliakoff drama schedule), this channel still feels marooned between the tits-out, ratings-up commissioning policy imposed by the old Dyke and the highbrow rhetoric now being promoted by Thommo and Gradey.

Documentaries – such as a recent tacky drama-doc marking the twentieth anniversary of Bhopal – are a particular disaster. A few scholarly docs will please the BBC governors, but the newspapers will inevitably gloat about BBC1's falling audience share. If head honcho Lorraine Heggessy can square that circle, they should give her the United Nations next.

BBC2: New controller Roly Keating already has the respect of the media editors in a way that his predecessor Rooty never had. His only problem is that he's inherited a mansion filled with burglars.

Channel 4 has already nicked *The Simpsons*, cornerstone of the early evening schedule, and no plausible replacement has been found. The edgy comedies and dramas that gave the channel its flavour in recent years now routinely debut on BBC3. Sometimes – as with last year's dark medical drama *Bodies* – these shows feel second-hand by the time they get their supposedly "main" screening on Two.

The nightmare for BBC2 is that it's like a well-run bank that's being plundered to keep struggling ventures going. Every attempt to give BBC4 more impact results in BBC2 having less. *Little Britain* goes straight from BBC3 to BBC1 to shore up that channel and Two has lost another ratings-winner. The more Tessa-impressing late-night news and current affairs is put on One, the more the audience for *Newsnight* is squeezed. Paradoxically, the biggest problem for Two is that it isn't seen by the governors as being in trouble.

BBC3 / BBC4: Mainly *see above*. Though claiming a bigger slice of reviews and ratings than in previous years, every piece on their plate threatens hunger somewhere else. It's increasingly uncertain that the BBC viewing cake can be cut four ways.

ITV1: Just as John Major got seven years as PM purely by virtue of not being Margaret Thatcher, Michael Heseltine or Neil Kinnock, so ITV1's positives at the moment are all negatives. The more that BBC1 is required to go upbrow to secure the licence fee, the more likely the mass-audience will turn over for any old rubbish on the commercial network.

Unfortunately, rubbish it usually is. In 2004, the network had one ratings banker (*I'm A Celebrity...*) and one kudos project (Russell T Davies's *Mine All Mine*). Otherwise, it was a surely unnecessary new *Miss Marple* and a stream of punch-ups featuring terrible signing Ross Kemp. Ratings points may look better for the advertisers than they have but otherwise ITV feels oddly pointless.

Channel 4: Despite executive turmoil (three chief executives in the last two years) and structural uncertainty (with the Five merger abandoned, C4 desperately needs a new future shape), the programming still feels cannier than any other channel's.

Projects that seem shameless (such as *The Sex Inspectors*) are always balanced by projects such as *Shameless* – Paul Abbot's drama was the must-watch product of last year. Just when you think that the channel would screen live necrophilia if it thought there was an audience for it, along comes a serious piece of liberal docu-drama such as *Sex Traffic*.

If there are problems, it's a tendency to over-exploit hit formulas (Aggie and Kim were fun cleaning up people's houses, but yucky when they did bodies) and the fact that impressive drama honcho John Yorke has been poached back to the BBC.

Five: Originally perceived as being the tits channel on British television, Five tried to reposition itself as the arts channel. These days, it doesn't seem sure if it's porn or Picasso. Depressingly, the network gets its biggest ratings for movies and football. That's good business but bad television. Gradually making its new name stick, Five desperately needs yet another image makeover.

Sky: The question for Murdoch is how ruthless he wants to be. Recent decisions to keep hot American imports (such as *Nip/Tuck*) for Sky alone rather than sharing them with terrestrials have panicked the traditional networks. And last month's exclusive deal for cricket further suggests that the old man no longer accepts the wisdom that the government and the audience won't accept good stuff only being available on Sky.

The tension now is whether Rupe would ever be cruel enough to withhold, say, *The Simpsons* from terrestrial. But he shouldn't look too smug. The really odd thing is how relatively low the figures for Sky still remain 20 years on, despite all these attempts at blackmail and programme hostage-taking. Strangely, for a man who prides himself on his ruthless capitalism, much of Murdoch's telly presence in Britain can still be regarded as vanity channels.

Digital Channels: Like someone wanting a shag at *The Spectator*, the digital channels just have to sit still and wait. The more problems the other networks have, the more viewers will try out the alternatives, however bad they are. Which – generally – they are.

'Remote Controller'

TV SCHEDULING

"It's a 20-minute programme, but with ad-breaks, some long trails and a news summary I reckon we can stretch it to an hour and a quarter"

GOING LIVE

LIVE NOW for the latest on "traffic chaos" caused by an accident on the motorway as the Christmas rush begins.

"The area has been brought to a standstill,", reveals a GMTV reporter... standing on a bridge under which traffic is clearly flowing freely and at speed.

DUMB BRITAIN

The Weakest Link, BBC2

Anne Robinson: Which country in the United Kingdom has the thistle as its national emblem?

Contestant: Great Britain?

Robinson: The Tom Finney Museum of Football is in which Lancashire town?

Contestant: York.

Robinson: The name of which small wingless jumping insect precedes "bite", "collar" and "market" to give three familiar terms?

Contestant: Bicycle.

Steve Wright's Big Quiz, Radio 2

Wright: What type of headgear is also the name of a film starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers?

Contestant: Bobble hat.

100 GREATEST MOMENTS
CHANNEL 5
AND AFTER ALL THESE NEVER ENDING BEST MOMENTS SHOWS...
THE GREATEST MOMENT TURNS OUT TO BE ...
THE ONE WHERE YOU SWITCH OFF
Ken Pyne

MEDIA NEWS

TIDINGS of great joy from the UK Film Council, which announced over Christmas that "British films" – including *Troy*, *Alexander* and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* – had a record share of US box-office takings in 2004. This follows another triumphant announcement a month earlier, when the council boasted that two of the top five films in UK cinemas last year had been "British" – *Harry Potter* and *Troy*.

In truth, of course, these films are about as British as Dick van Dyke in *Mary Poppins*. All their revenues go to Time Warner, an American corporation. As the independent British producer Jonathan Gems pointed out in a recent letter to the *FT*: "Weirdly, having allowed the British film industry to be destroyed by Hollywood, the government is now taking credit for Hollywood movies!"

To restore a genuine British film industry, Gems added, "we need to place limits on the US distribution cartel which currently controls 88 per cent of the British market". The cartel in question is UIP, the biggest distribution company in the world, jointly run by the American studios Universal, Paramount and MGM. British and European film-makers have long argued that UIP uses its monopoly powers to keep local product out of cinemas, for the benefit of its owners in California.

But it seems unlikely that the UK Film Council will be throwing its weight behind this campaign. The council's newly appointed chairman, Stewart Till, also happens to be the British chairman and chief executive of, er, UIP. Who better to bang the drum and blow the trumpet on behalf of "British films" than the boss of a company that is wholly owned by Hollywood studios?

THE ADMIRABLE decision by the winner of ITV's *X-Factor*, Steve Brookstein, to donate all proceeds from his debut single to tsunami relief helped the song to replace the equally charitable Band Aid in the top spot.

Brookstein's generosity may, however, ensure that he needs to go back to his old job as a taxi driver even quicker than expected. The traditional pattern for reality pop show winners is an initial massive number one (*Popstars* winners Hear'Say had the fastest-selling debut single ever) leading to rapid obscurity (Michelle McManus, the victor of last Christmas's *Pop Idol*, has already vanished from public view).

While his philanthropic gesture pushed Brookstein up to his rightful place at the top of the charts on his second week of release (his was the first reality single not to debut at number one), it will have denied him the bulk of the income he was likely to make from his TV victory.

That might not, however, have been an enormous amount, judging by the comments of his manager, Simon Cowell (the highest earning TV personality of 2004 with an income of £18m), who assured reporters that although single sales would generate "several hundred thousand" for the relief fund, "the cost to Steve will be a few thousand."

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

"Mohan Singh, a local Sikh community leader, said: "When they're doing a play about a Sikh priest raping somebody inside a gurdwara, would any religion take it lying down?"
— *BBC News website*, 19 December.

"Mohan Singh, a local Sikh community leader, said: "When they're doing a play about a Sikh priest raping somebody inside a gurdwara, would any religion take it?"
— *BBC News website*, 20 December.

THE LATEST shopping channel to set up stall in the far reaches of the digital programme guide, the Express Shopping Channel, has been receiving generous amounts of publicity from all its proprietor Richard Desmond's publications, from *OK!* through to *Horny Housewives*.

On 22 December the *Daily Star* treated its readers to a full-page "last minute gift guide" plugging a range of "the latest fashions, heavenly home goods, eye-catching electronics and fab fitness gadgets" which could be purchased from the "specially-tailored TV shows" which feature on the channel. As hack Natasha Jones pointed out, "it really couldn't be easier for the home shopper" – just as long, that is, as they didn't actually want their gifts in time for Christmas. The last day that the channel could guarantee dispatch was the best part of a week earlier, on the 17th.

ONE of the early effects of the forthcoming 15 percent cuts at the BBC is beginning to be seen in staff rotas – programmes are recruiting more producers on attachment from other areas, especially in the run-up to the end of the financial year.

These inevitably inexperienced staff have to be "broken in" by more experienced team members and everything takes twice as long as a result. Worse still, the old hands often find that their place in the rota is taken by the new attached ingénue leaving them with nothing to do and at the mercy of the accountants.

The practice is known as "doing a cuckoo" and it stems from the fact that producers on attachment continue to have their wages paid by their original departments while they're away. Hey Presto! Two cost savings – free work from the new producer and automatic redundancy for the one being replaced.

BBC News is facing major cutbacks and still nobody knows where the axe will fall. But there are clues in director of news Helen Boaden's latest "message".

There will be 15 percent "value for money savings" right across news. But at the same time Boaden wants to "prioritise original, evidential journalism" and "build up" current affairs. Will "new" money be available to fund all this? Er, no. Cash will actually come from the 15 percent savings themselves and from cuts. The news board is concentrating attention on "unnecessary duplication". Given their commitment to News 24, this is bad news for anybody working on bulletins for BBC World and on BBC1's Six o'clock and One o'clock programmes.

RICHARD SAMBROOK, director of world service and global news, is conducting yet another internal inquiry, this time to find out why BBC World managed to give live airtime to a hoaxer claiming to offer $12bn compensation for the victims of the Bhopal disaster.

"What can we learn from this?" he muses. We can learn perhaps that BBC World producers might have been better trained to spot this sort of stunt. Shame then that the Elstree training centre is closing down. Shame too that there is a £2m funding gap and a shortage of trainers at the heart of the re-structured training department.

WHEN not on freeloading jaunts to watch endangered whales or rocket launches, science hacks like nothing better than to give each other lavish prizes funded by pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline.

Every June, for example, half a dozen each get a £2,500 Glaxo science writers' gong at a major awards bash. But alas no more. Fed up with the ingrates taking their dosh and then rubbishing them, Glaxo has slashed funding for the scheme, forcing the poor scribblers to take their begging bowls elsewhere.

Led by the science writers' chairman, Palab Ghosh of the BBC, they have now turned to GM food manufacturer Syngenta. And should that fail, the resourceful lads and lasses have already targeted British Nuclear Fuels. And after that? Well, there is always British American Tobacco or Monsanto…

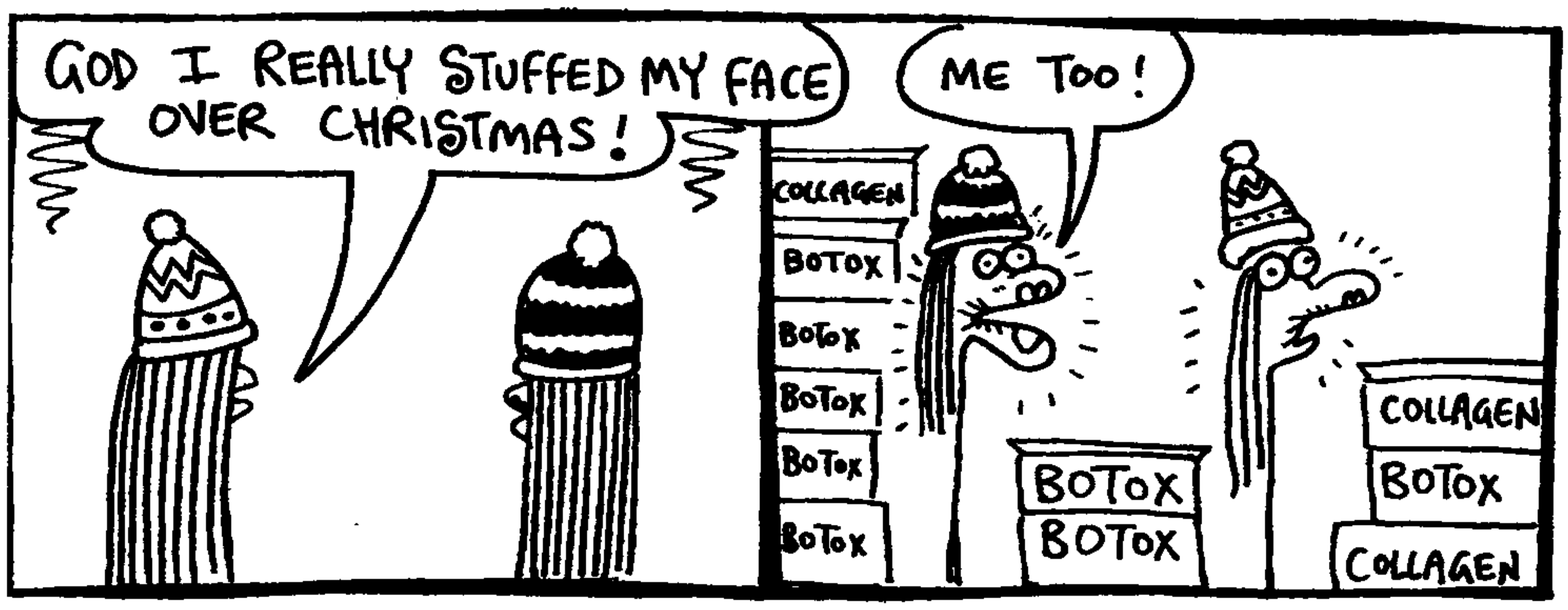
FLAGGING ticket sales are not the ideal start promised by the Wales Millennium Centre, the £105m pile opened with much hype four weeks before Christmas in the presence of Brenda and a host of Welsh celebs and hangers-on.

Attempts to lure punters to the 1,900 seat auditorium have not succeeded, despite swathes of free paper being handed out. The building, the latest addition to Cardiff's swanky waterfront, needs a 70 percent bums-on-seats rate to pay its way.

Matinees by the circus troupe Cirque Eloize were cancelled just before the festive season. Red-faced marketeers admitted that the obvious audiences – school parties and coach trips – had not been reached.

SUPERMODELS

KERBER



DOING THE ROUNDS

Hunt the dud doctor

THE General Medical Council cancelled its Christmas party last month, doubtless aware of the unfortunate juxtaposition of seasonal jollity and the coruscating criticism from the latest instalment of the Shipman Inquiry. But for all her outpourings, chair Dame Janet Smith hasn't told doctors or readers of this column anything they hadn't realised years ago: the GMC can't protect patients from dangerous doctors, but no one else wants the job.

MD has long argued that self-regulation has to be devolved and independent. The GMC, which operates out of smart offices in Euston Road, can't possibly monitor what goes on in the front-line of the NHS. As one council member put it: "We're more of a long stop than a wicket keeper." Alas they've dropped so many catches, from the Bristol Inquiry onwards, that their preoccupation is as much with their own survival as protecting patients. As Dame Janet put it: "So far as the GMC was concerned, Shipman was free to practise medicine unrestricted."

The GMC's response to this criticism was predictable; having ignored whistleblowers for decades, they apprehended a handful of Hyde doctors for not blowing the whistle on Shipman. As if it would have made any difference. And neither would the plethora of revalidation and reappraisal programmes that have been spawned by the GMC and Royal Colleges post-Shipman. An ingenious psychopath could easily jump through such hoops. To suggest these watered down competency checks might pick up another Shipman is akin to introducing tests for lorry drivers to pick up another Peter Sutcliffe. Shipman was not an incompetent doctor – he was a mass murderer who happened to be a doctor.

There will hopefully never be another Shipman but, according to former GMC president Donald Irvine, there may still be as many as 11,000 incompetent doctors working in the NHS. Alas, like the rest of the GMC, he doesn't know where they work. So what's the solution? Doctors remain the best people to judge the quality of work of other doctors, provided they don't have a vested interest. Dr William Pickering has long argued for a medical inspectorate independent of the NHS, GMC or royal colleges, present in every region and dedicated to picking up errors and mistreatment by acting swiftly on tip-offs from whistleblowers and patient complaints.

As Pickering puts it: "All clinical complaints, plus a copy of the written response to the patient will pass across the inspectorate's desk. This will press medical personnel and NHS managers into prompt, open and accurate explanations. If indicated, the inspectorate would examine the medical records and if sub-standard clinical practice is evident, it will swiftly inform the doctor and the regulatory bodies. Its very presence will force all doctors to examine their practice. Clinical standards may be expected to quickly rise. Expensive legal defence costs and awards are likely to drop. Above all, patients can be sure that their doctors are, at last, meaningfully clinically accountable." But who will pay for it?

(Dr Pickering's proposals are expanded in Regulating Doctors, edited by D Gladstone, ISBN 1-903 386-0.)

M.D.

off your trolley

REEVE & WAY

WELL, IF YOU'RE NOT HAPPY WITH MY RECOMMENDATION...
YOU ARE ENTITLED TO A SECOND OPINION
AND DON'T THINK I WON'T, LIKE A SHOT
UNNECESSARY PROCEDURE, SEND HIM HOME WITH ASPIRIN
ADMIN
HEH HEH...
WARDS
BASTARD

SIGNAL FAILURES

First – the bad news

LAST YEAR was wonderful for Aberdeen-based FirstGroup, but not quite so good for passengers. "First", as it likes to call itself, lost the money-spinning Great Eastern rail franchise, yet its rail profits still rocketed 55 percent in the first half of 2004-05.

FirstGroup was given the ScotRail franchise in 2004 by the Scottish Executive, whose transport minister Nicol Stephen (MSP for Aberdeen South) formerly ran a company that advised First on communications (*Eye* 1109). ScotRail is a plum franchise, as Scotland is the only part of Britain with a strategy for expanding railways (*Eye* 1120).

First, with French firm Keolis, took over TransPennine Express (TPE) in February. A few months later services were cancelled en masse because of a drivers' dispute and because a type of train that worked OK for previous franchisee Arriva, as it does elsewhere, became a "fundamentally unreliable train" when it passed into WorstGroup's hands.

This won't have surprised TPE passengers who also use Worst's buses. In Sheffield, its bus drivers staged Britain's longest uninterrupted bus strike in 30 years. Then First West Yorkshire was rapped after a maintenance check on 96 buses found that more than half had defects, including 14 requiring immediate attention. Across the Pennines, First Manchester's pisspoor buses continued to raise hackles and an inquiry into maintenance was held after three incidents in which buses lost wheels while in service. In March, a First Manchester bus was involved in an accident in which a schoolgirl died. The vehicle's condition was not to blame, but investigations revealed that the bus had no MoT certificate.

WorstGroup had to abandon some Staffordshire services when First PMT [*sic*] was stripped of half its bus licences as punishment for a maintenance regime described officially as a dismal failure. But First Devon & Cornwall got off lightly after checks discovered 16 percent of buses late or early, five percent cancelled and a quarter not showing destinations correctly. The punishment for causing passengers such misery was a fine of £64,000, or 0.03 percent of WorstGroup's profit for 2003-04. That fine followed a tap on the wrist in March for crap bus maintenance. In April, WorstGroup announced sweeping cuts and 130 job losses in Cornwall to save money.

Not all Scots are delighted that First now controls most Scottish public transport. West Lothian councillors were promised more punctual buses in July, but complained of little improvement three months later. When MSPs asked the boss of local firm Lothian Buses why he didn't provide an alternative in West Lothian, he answered: "I will not start a bus war in West Lothian as I will risk being squashed. FirstGroup had a good enough go at us last time, when we did nothing to provoke it."

"New" Labour's refusal to reverse Thatcher's disastrous deregulation of buses outside London means even official bodies can do little when Britain's biggest bus firm is ensconced and banking £900m a year from UK buses alone. Much of the cash comes from poor and vulnerable people who have no alternative. Politicians and the chattering classes gave up on buses outside London years ago, so fall-out from dire bus services is limited to the odd story in the local rag – and nobody questions whether WorstGroup deserves more lucrative rail franchises.

THE FESTIVE SEASON brought the usual flurry of train-replacement buses. One reason they're now so common at weekends and holidays is "new" Labour's insistence on rail franchising. When a railway closes for maintenance there may well be an alternative route, at least between main stations. But if the alternative route's franchised to a different company, the operator affected would need to hire drivers from its rival (train drivers must be familiar with every route they drive).

Franchises, mostly owned by bus companies, have no official incentive or requirement to keep the trains running if possible. Coach drivers get much less pay than train drivers, and franchises get away with providing no rail staff on the buses. The rail industry's higher standards of safety and accessibility can be legitimately abandoned when the train is a bus, yet the highest fares can still apply. So it's more cost-effective to condemn "customers" to the hassle and confusion of replacement coaches than to organise diversions and hire train drivers.

'Dr B. Ching'

ROTTEN BOROUGHS AWARDS 2004

WELCOME to this year's Rotten Boroughs Awards, the most prestigious event in the local government calendar, according to a basket of performance indicators on a balanced scorecard. This year's ceremony comes from the Speechley Suite at the Crapita Plaza Travelodge and Bowl, Rotherham.

David Blunkett Award for Abuse of the Legal System

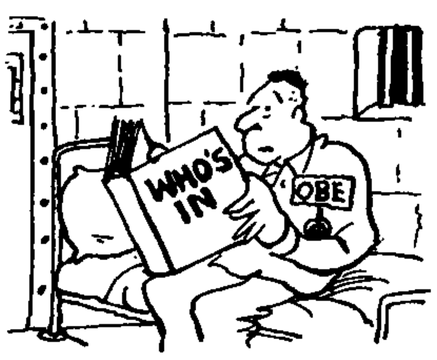
THERE was a very strong field this year in one of the most rapidly expanding areas of local government – using the law to suppress free speech and intimidate opponents. *Winner*: **Camden council,** which spent seven months preparing a case against a Defend Council Housing campaigner who had, er, put up a poster in a bus shelter. The council was seeking a £1000 fine and £460 costs but backed down three days before the case was due in court after the *Eye* and other publications ran the story. *Runner-up*: **Hastings council,** which took a protester to court for "harassment" after she handed out leaflets opposing the council's botched regeneration schemes and asked the council's deputy leader: "Why are you ruining Hastings?" A judge kicked the case out; happily the taxpayer was on hand to pick up the legal bill.

Brass-necked councillor of the year

2002 winner **Jim Speechley,** former leader of **Lincolnshire county council,** made an impressive bid to regain his title by turning up at a council meeting wearing an electronic tag after being released from prison. Shaming, certainly, but if he hadn't turned up he'd have missed out on his allowance! Former **Bristol Lib-Dem** councillor **John Astley** continued to claim his £9,200-a-year allowance while on remand over child porn charges, for which he subsequently got 15 months. For sheer brass neck, however, this year's award goes to former **Wear Valley** district councillor **Stephen Gregory**, who for nearly a year claimed to be able to represent his Bishop Auckland constituents from the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean, where he had been detained on business of a Ugandan nature since last January. The former butcher continued to trouser the taxpayers' money until he resigned a week before Christmas.

Shit of the year

EDDIE Aldridge, former leader of **Moray council**, former deputy lord lieutenant and holder of the OBE for "services to local government", who was jailed in June for forging an elderly neighbour's will in an attempt to get his hands on her £100,000 estate.



Educational Initiative of the Year

WALSALL council's Christmas holiday website competition inviting schoolchildren to "match the poo" – pairing photographs of turds with the animals that produced them.

New Technology cock-up of the year

LAMBETH Lib-Dem councillor **Angie Meader**, whose email referring to "compensation" to councils from developers as "bribes" was sent not to a party colleague as intended, but to an opposition Labour councillor by mistake.

Spinner of the Year

BATH tourism chief **Jan Siegieda**, who attempted to justify the shambles of the Bath Spa project – four years late and millions over-budget – by saying: "I think it is great that the Spa is shut. The longer it stays shut the better. The fact that it is shut is making more people find out about it. In a strange sort of way it is working in our favour." Days after this story appeared in February, Mr Siegieda became Bath's ex-tourism chief.

QUOTES OF THE YEAR

"I hope that sane-minded people in this borough do not subscribe to Private Eye. If they do, then they should get a life." – Cllr **Helal Abbas,** leader of **Tower Hamlets** council.

"Maybe there could have been fewer speeches." – **Camden** councillor **Nasim Ali**, after a meeting to celebrate the reconciliation of the borough's teenage gangs broke up with a wild-west-style brawl following one pompous councillor's oration too many.

"Morally bankrupt and rotten to the core." – departing **Lincolnshire** chief executive **David Bowles** bids a fond farewell to the county council's ruling Conservative group.

"A crime-ridden, rubbish-strewn hellhole." – Peterborough mayor **Raja Akhtar** does his bit to promote the city in an interview with the *Sunday People.*

"Arseholes!" – **Sheila Peacock**, mayor of **Haringey** and "older people's champion", greets oldies demonstrating at the town hall against care home closures.

Health & Safety Award

WINNER: **Suffolk county council** for banning hanging baskets suspended from lamp-posts in Bury St Edmunds, despite there being no record of anyone ever having been injured by a falling hanging basket. *Runner-up:* **St Edmundsbury borough council**, which added to the fun in Bury St Edmunds by banning Christmas lights in case they electrocuted someone or started a fire.

Tory Bigot of the Year

FORMER **Peterborough city council** leader **Neville "Fuck the Irish" Sanders** was impressive for the breadth of his bigotry – against the "lying, cheating" disabled, "drug dealing" *Big Issue* sellers, "harlot" female councillors and, of course, the "lazy" Irish.

West Sussex's Cllr **Alan Phillips** was commended by the judges for his subtle tribute to Smethwick '64: "If you want a traveller for a neighbour, vote Labour." But the winner had to be **Stowmarket** town councillor **Keith Mayers-Hewitt**, whose breezy, where's-your-sense-of-humour observation on seeing some Asian men using computers in Stowmarket library was hard to beat: "Have aliens landed, or is it an invasion of darkies?"

Enterprising Contractor of the Year

THE traffic warden employed by **Lambeth** council's parking enforcement contractor Control Plus who slapped a ticket on a damaged moped lying on a yellow line while its rider was being treated for a broken leg by paramedics.

Patriotic Poseur of the Year

COLCHESTER Conservative councillor **Kevin Bentley**, who posed in the local paper with a "how it might look" model of a possible future HMS *Colchester*, which on closer inspection turned out to be an Airfix model of the World War II German battleship *Bismarck.*

Blue-Sky Thinking Award

COLIN Pritchard, "head of performance management" at **Cumbria county council** social services, who attempted to address the department's abysmal record by issuing all staff with a plastic drinks coaster carrying a logo of a cross in a circle, so they would be inspired to stay "On Target" every time they had a cup of tea.

Sensitive Communicator of the Year

SOUTHWARK council's housing department, which wrote to an elderly couple accusing them of having spent their rent money on a holiday and demanding £525 arrears sharpish. Apart from the fact that the couple had never been behind with their rent, that they hadn't had a holiday for years and that the wife was grieving for her husband, who had died of cancer two months previously, the letter was spot on.

Leading by Example Award

DONCASTER Mayor **Martin Winter**, who took his children out of school to attend the Glastonbury pop festival shortly after his education director had written a letter to parents scolding those who took their kids on family holidays in term time.

Not quite everyone in the world of local government is a knave or a fool, of course. So we'd like to honour two people who actually did some good in 2004...

Woman of the Year

YVONNE Hossack, the Northamptonshire solicitor whose success in fighting the closure of residential care homes has embarrassed councils up and down the land – and earned her the enmity of the political and legal establishment. Mrs Hossack is likely to go bankrupt soon, following a decision by the Legal Services Commission ("minister" responsible: David Lammy) to stop funding of any of her cases outside the east Midlands.

Man of the Year

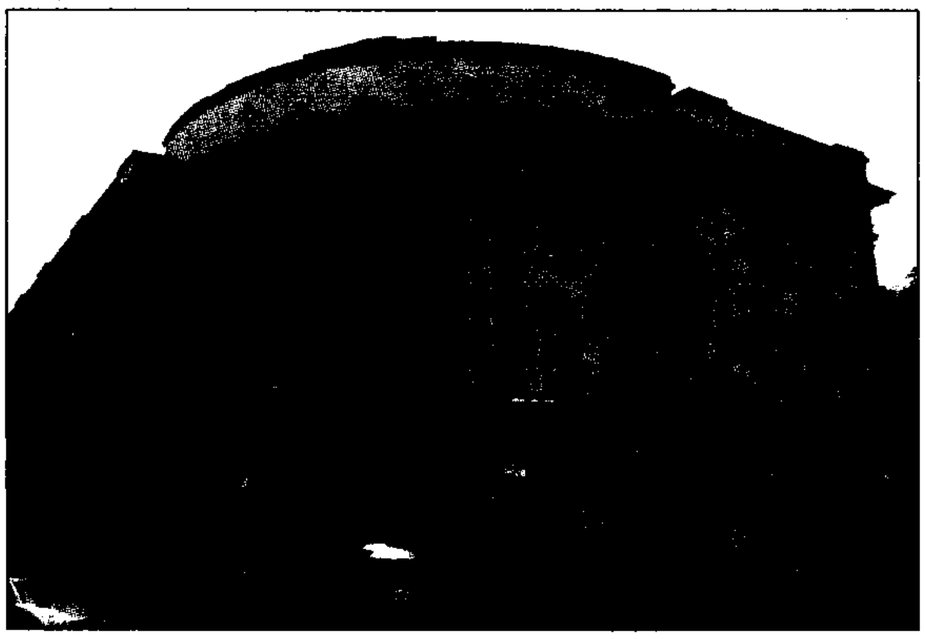
DAVID Bowles, the former chief executive of **Lincolnshire** county council, whose steadfastness in opposing the bullying of staff by former council leader Jim Speechley and whose determination to expose Speechley's corruption eventually led to the latter's imprisonment (*see also* Quotes and Brass-neck nominations). Speechley was jailed in April after attempting to alter the route of a bypass to boost the value of land he owned.

NOOKS and CORNERS

VISITORS arriving at Bath Spa station hoping to see the famous elegant city and "World Heritage Site" are immediately confronted, to the west of the station approach, by the Southgate shopping centre.

This is a squalid collection of cheap concrete shops combined with a smelly bus station, all designed by the Owen Luder Partnership in the 1960s – the period when Hugh Casson and others did so much damage to the Georgian city. Happily, for more than a decade, it has been planned to replace the Southgate Centre with something better. Bath & North East Somerset council (Banes) has now approved a re-redevelopment scheme by Morley Fund Management with Shearer Property Holdings. This is designed by Chapman Taylor Architects and Wilkinson Eyre Architects.

Alas the proposed re-siting of the bus station involves the demolition, not only of some arches and vaults belonging to Brunel's railway viaduct, but also of W A Williams's 1931 Churchill House. Designed as an electricity showroom and offices, Churchill House may not be a great building, but it is appropriate and more than competent. It is an essay in the classical tradition associated with Bath, a language the architect clearly understood. It is a dignified, grammatical and coherent piece of architecture which is much more distinguished (and accomplished) than the vulgar blocks in the Developers' Palladian style of the new shopping centre proposed by Chapman Taylor. Before Christmas a demonstration was mounted outside Churchill House and a petition against its removal was signed by more than 500 people.



Churchill House: dignified and grammatical

Why sacrifice a good piece of modern classical architecture for something inferior? The Georgian Group, SAVE Britain's Heritage and the Twentieth Century Society all oppose the demolition of Churchill House: surely with a little ingenuity it could be retained to enhance the new development?

ANOTHER fine classical building under threat is the Grosvenor Chapel in Mayfair –not this time from demolition, but from gratuitous change. The chapel is an originally unimpressive Georgian box of 1730 which was eventually made gloriously impressive internally in 1912-13 and later by Ninian Comper, who installed a giant classical screen and other furnishings. Everything is white and gold, except for the pews and panelling which were painted dark, dark brown (like the waxed oak in an unrestored Wren church) so that all attention is focussed on the altar. The result is moving and memorable – a creative development of the Georgian.

The present incumbent, the Reverend Simon Hobbs, dislikes the dark woodwork and has employed Caroe & Partners to brighten up the interior. These architects now propose painting the woodwork a light stone colour – as it was originally. Why? There is no point in restoring the Grosvenor to its ordinary 1730 appearance, as what makes it special and interesting is the learned and sophisticated transformation by Comper. He was one of the greatest and most influential modern designers in the Anglican church and his work – in its scholarship and subtlety – deserves respect. The Georgian Group, the Victorian Society and the Twentieth Century Society are united in thinking so. Comper's work in the Grosvenor Chapel was greatly admired by the sainted founder of this column, Sir John Betjeman – another very good reason why it should be left alone.

FINALLY, at the risk of boring my readers, I must return to the Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment (CABE). In response to the Acting Chairman's letter of protest [*Eye* 1121], I should point out that the AHL Audit (which he claims gave CABE a clean bill of health) specifically excluded consideration of its conduct in the two cases – the Croydon Gateway site and South Kensington Station [*Eyes passim*] – which inspired the initial complaints to the Secretary of State. Furthermore, the Department of Culture, Media 'n' Sport has sent a letter to the accounting officer of every sponsored body and organisation asking that conflict of interest procedures be reviewed and strengthened in the light of those little problems at CABE. Interesting…

Meanwhile, the new chairman of CABE is not, in fact, Chris Smith MP, but the designer John Sorrell, whose firm, Newell and Sorrell, was responsible for rebranding British Airways with the ridiculous ethnic tailfin designs which made the company a laughing stock. I am not sure what that tells us, but good luck to him.

'Piloti'

Down On The Farm

ONE OF THE proudest boasts of the Blair government is that it has "opened up the countryside" as never before. The countryside rights of way act (Crow) has led to the designation of large areas of moor, mountain and downland as open to public access for walkers.

Alongside this has been a new drive to "modernise" the nation's rights of way to make sure that these have sufficient signage, parking facilities and access for the disabled and partially-sighted. A new "access industry" has been established, involving thousands of officials and "stakeholders" in "local access forums", to engage in consultation on how these facilities can be "improved".

Typical of this exercise has been a series of leaflets circulated by the "communications and marketing group" of Somerset county council. They promise "focus group sessions" for the blind, the disabled, cyclists, walkers, riders, etc, with the aim of producing an "improvement plan for access on rights of way within Somerset". The aim is to draw up at least 50 local "open access management plans", ensuring that each area is provided with proper signs, maps, disabled access stiles and "kissing gate-type" access points accessible to wheelchairs. It all sounds very admirable, until the question arises of how it will be paid for.

The only actual funding available appears to be a £2511 grant from the Countryside Agency, representing 75 percent of the initial cost of preparing all these plans – the remaining 25 percent to be made up from redeploying an existing council official to spend one day per week on the task. Not surprisingly, according to a council memo, "at the current time it is understood that the preparation of management plans does not commit the county council to implementation". In other words, the whole thing is a nice politically correct gesture – but in practice a complete waste of everybody's time.

'Muckspreader'

Many have large markets outside the Islamic world – among them Koc Holding, a Turkish conglomerate whose subsidiaries include Arcelik, which sells household appliances across Europe.

Economist on line

DEFRA AND DUMB

YOU MIGHT think that one way to make use of the millions of tonnes of useful "leftovers" from the food industry, thus avoiding wasteful landfill and incineration, would be to, er, eat them. Now a tax break which helped charities do just that has been scrapped.

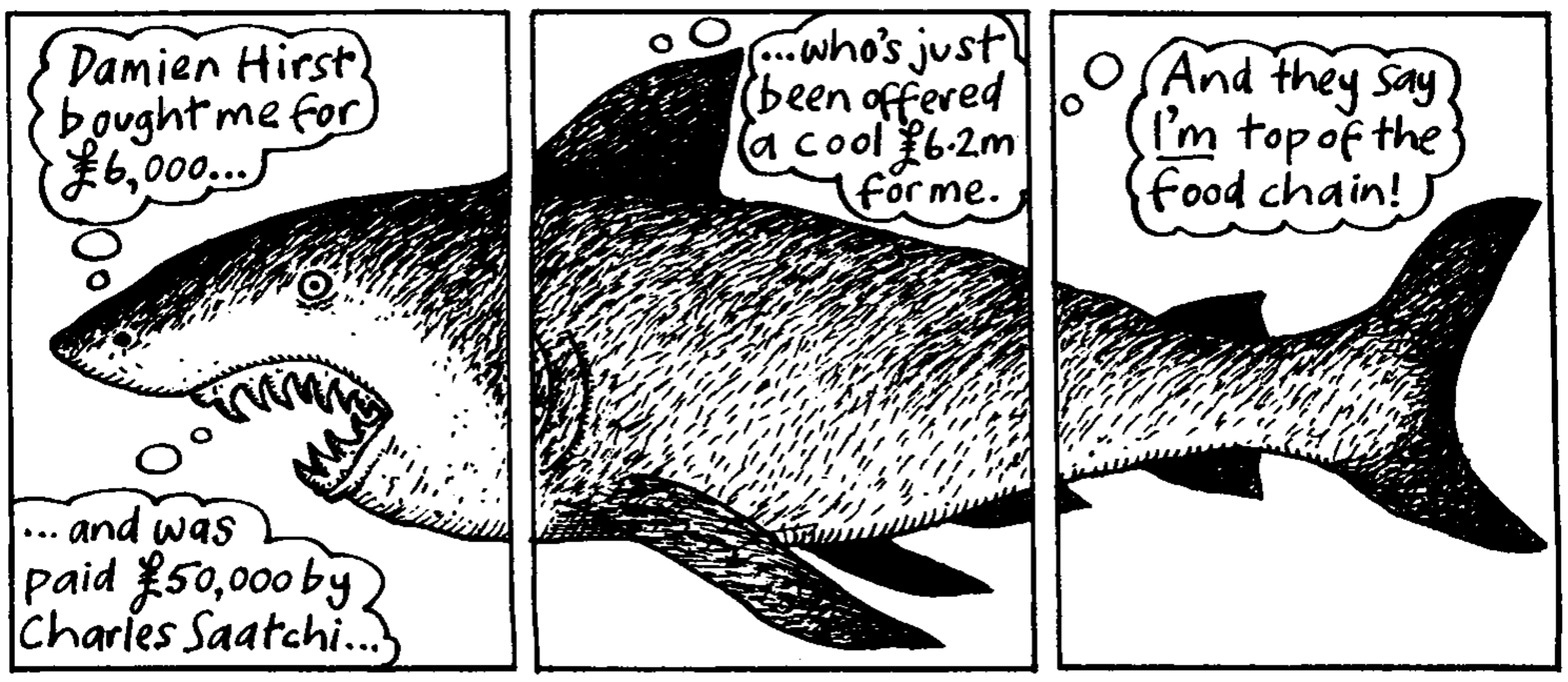
Under the landfill tax credit scheme (LTCS), operators of waste disposal sites are able to claim a huge tax credit against donations which benefit their local communities or the environment. After a review of the scheme last year found that LTCS had done too little to encourage "sustainable waste management", the department for environment, food and rural affairs decided to scrap the funding criteria which covered projects diverting waste from landfill.

Over the past eight years, the charity Fareshare has received £400,000 funding through the scheme. It redistributes some of the mountain of surplus from the food and drink industry and has fed 12,000 homeless and vulnerable people every week. Stores such as Sainsbury's and Marks & Spencer would otherwise have to dump food which is past its "sell by" date, but within its "use by" date. Fareshare's bosses are furious at the decision, fearing they will have to curtail their operations unless alternative funding becomes available.

They have been told that Defra wants to use the funding to explore "new technology solutions" to waste management. Actually eating the food just isn't impressive enough for them.

YOUNG BRITISH ARTISTS

BY BIRCH


Damien Hirst bought me for £6,000...
... and was paid £50,000 by Charles Saatchi...
...who's just been offered a cool £6·2m for me.
And they say I'm top of the food chain!

AD NAUSEAM

The Blunt Pencil Awards 2004

THE CHAT amongst agency creative heads at the pre-Christmas parties saw most of them bemoaning a forgettable year for advertising. Not in money terms – 2004 saw a distinct upturn in most agencies' turnovers – but in quality. No single ad last year contained that elusive "Did you see?" factor. There was, however, a bumper crop of lemons, ranging from the merely mediocre to the resoundingly poor.

Agency of the year – at a canter – is **Lowes**, who managed to lose a dazzling array of blue-chip accounts in the space of six months, including £334m of global work for HSBC. Unilever has removed its Flora (£53m) and Surf (£8m) accounts, Braun have taken their £40m brief elsewhere, and rumours continue to circle about the crucial Tesco business. Lowes cut 50 jobs in the summer on the back of this brilliant showing.

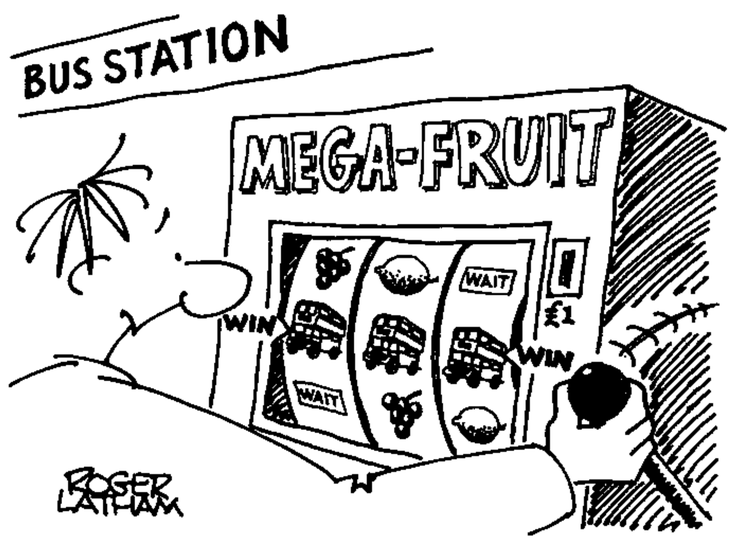
Still, it wasn't all bad news – at least Lowes had the launch account for **Coca-Cola**'s Dasani mineral water, to which we award the **Best New Product Launch** gong for their famed attempts to sell "Eau de Sidcup" to the masses. The Great British Public could probably have swallowed the revelation that Dasani was actually bottled tap water – but when it was discovered that half a million bottles also contained a carcinogen, Dasani was hastily withdrawn

Coca-Cola wasn't the only mega-brand to have a bad year. In the face of pressure over childhood obesity **McDonald's** introduced salads – with more fat than their burgers – and **Cadburys** gave sports equipment to schools, in exchange for chocolate bar wrappers. **Sainsbury's**, meanwhile, used Jamie Oliver to tout the benefits of farmed salmon, in spite of the fact that his restaurant, 15, refuses to sell the stuff.

Regulator of the Year was curiously uncompetitive this time round, probably because in May Ofcom announced plans to make the ASA the only regulatory body for all advertising. And so, the **Regulator of the Year** award goes to the **ASA**, on the back of this stunning endorsement from the House of Commons health committee report, also in May: "We were disturbed at the ineffectiveness of the Advertising Standards Authority."

And so, to the palme d'or, the **Most Nauseating Ad of 2004**. **Ford** certainly impressed the judges with their rip-off of Honda's acclaimed "Cog" ad for the Focus C-Max, a knock-off that looked like it had been thrown together by a toddler with a laptop. **Gaviscon**, supposedly a cure for gutrot, managed to create widespread nausea with a spot showing a traffic policewoman body-popping to strains of *Flashdance*. **Cadburys** had scrofulous hyenas in tiaras, who were somehow supposed to make you want to eat chocolate, while **Strongbow** further weakened the cider market by setting a booze ad in the mouth of a whale. Continuing the misguided use of animals theme, **3** featured Chinese dancing cowboys giving a drink to a pulsating giant squid, in an ad which industry folk will tell you "divided opinion" – meaning adland loved it and nobody else understood it.

In such exalted company this is an award where there really can be no winners, but after much deliberation it was decided to recognise the sustained contribution of **Michael Winner**. Over several years, Winner has brought all the talent and subtlety he showed as a film-maker to advertising. Not content with writing and starring in **esure**'s ads since 2002 he stepped up a gear in 2004 with work for **First Alternative**. As a result the catchphrases, "Calm down, dear, it's a com-*mer*-cial," "I'm not his sister", and "Will someone please pass me a blunt chisel, I have just seen the First Alternative ad and have lost the will to live," have all entered the lexicon.



Warballs

● "Number brands are immediately understood around the world, adds David Haigh, MD of Brand Finance. 7-Up is a great example and 7-Eleven is 'a brilliant number brand: it just shouts convenience', says Haigh. But perhaps the most potent number brand of all is 9/11. In three years it has become one of the world's most famous brands, associated with the vivid image of New York's burning Twin Towers. Davidson believes the use of number brands has grown since – and possibly as a consequence of – 9/11." — ***Financial Director* magazine**.

● "Two anglers were arrested in Merseyside last month under the ISPS code for fishing at a port without permission. A spokesperson for Mersey Docks and Harbour Company said: 'The world is very different from before 9/11…'" — ***Yachting Monthly***.

● "One of the after-effects of the terrorist attacks on 9/11 in New York has been an increase in the rental of camera gear." — ***Amateur Photographer***.

Letters

Private Eye

On probation

Sir,

Your doom and gloom piece on NOMS, the new National Offender Management Service (Eye 1122), predictably ignores some significant achievements. Since the bringing together of Prison, Probation and Sentencing Policy into one organisation, with the single aim of reducing re-offending, we have seen the seemingly inexorable growth in the prison population halted as minor offenders have been sent to custody in fewer numbers (the prison population today, December 23, is 900 lower than at Easter, despite statistical projections that it would be 3,000 higher). In April, every Probation area will receive a budget increase of more than 10 percent. London Probation, which has been under particular financial strain, will receive more. We shall begin to recruit about 2,000 more Probation staff next year and, as a result, there is a serious possibility of our being able to make a real difference to the life chances of offenders. Most people who joined the Probation Service did so with that purpose and, as I speak to them around the country, they recognise that the chances of their being successful have been transformed by the creation of a new organisation with Probation at its centre.

MARTIN NAREY,

Chief Executive, National Offender Management Service.

Hungary for love

Sir,

I had the pleasure to work alongside Malcolm Rudland, ex-secretary of the Peter Warlock (né Heseltine) Society and I was a little surprised by your picture of Malcolm being described as "bonkers" (Eye 1121).

Eccentric he may well be but then other eccentrics spring to mind: Francis Bacon, Pierre Boulez et al. One point your researchist seems to have missed is that on meeting M. Rudland you get the effect of a typical Yorkshireman putting the world to rights. He is nothing of the sort. I understand one parent to be born in Hungary and his task in life to foster all things Hungarian from Bela Bartok through Zoltan Kodaly to Bela Lugosi! He is an internationally known organist and teacher and his ability and zeal know no bounds. I hope this paints a picture of a "genius" who has not received the "press" he truly deserves. Whilst saying this I hope he will stand down gracefully from his ex-post with PWS and start the Bela Bartok Appreciation Society (London Branch) as its head.

RON HART,

Crouch End, London.

IT'S GRIM UP NORTH LONDON

KNIFE & PACKER

THE STATE OF SERVICE IN THIS COUNTRY IS A DISGRACE! ALL WE WANT IS A 24-HOUR GLAZIER...
THE 'YELLOW PAGES' IS APPARENTLY FULL OF THEM
BUT YOU TRY GETTING ONE TO COME OUT AT FOUR IN THE MORNING TO REPAIR A GILBERT AND GEORGE COMMEMORATIVE WINDOW
THEY DON'T "DO" STAINED GLASS!

LUVVIES

"I'm focusing more on playing the character of Widow Twankey, which I'm approaching in the same way I would any acting part. She's a complex character: a survivor who's been round the world, a north-of-England woman who's wound up raising her son in Peking and would do absolutely anything to protect him. That maternal urge is the strongest element of her character."

IAN McKELLEN
Guardian

Submitted by Strobes.

An occasional column devoted to gems from the acting profession. £10 paid for entries.

Those Covers: You Write

Sir,

Readers who reacted with shock-horror to your "Christmas Special" cover were missing the point (Letters, Eye 1122).

Art historians have long recognised that Pieter Bruegel's purpose was to contrast the holiness of the occasion with the unholiness of practically all those present. Speech bubbles were not as popular in the 16th century as they are today. If they had been, Bruegel's might well have said: "Apparently, it's Herod's"...

ALAN HOWARD.

... The point I made in a sermon on the 4th Sunday of Advent was that gossip about the paternity of Mary's child was precisely why Joseph had to be told by the Angel not to abandon her. But there of course the comparison ends, since Mrs Quinn is no virgin, and Joseph was willing to take on the responsibilities of fatherhood despite being told that It was not his. I think that could be the starting point for my sermon on the Holy Family...

REVD. SIMON HEANS.

...Your correspondents might be interested to know that this picture ("Adoration of the Magi" by Bruegel, 1564) was used in the Church Times caption competition about a year ago, attracting similar speech bubbles from the Christian readers of that organ, none of whom were presumably offended in the slightest...

GEOFFREY ROBINSON.

...I see that you have joined the ranks of those British who quite openly ridicule fine art. Not much good going on the box and doing old churches and what not if you're going to condone this kind of desecration. What a crowd of bloody jockstraps the British are...

QUENTIN WILLIAMS.

...Can't you convince these Christians that the Son of God is not an idol to be protected? In fact it seems quite likely that he has a sense of humour. Other religions may need protection in order to be credible. Surely the main facts about Christianity shows that it doesn't...

HEATHER BLACKER.

...Nuts to the humour-bypass brigade. My 87-year-old mother, an academic theologian and sometime local preacher, thought the Blunkett nativity was hilarious. She has recommended the Eye to friends in the UK and USA, and now wants her own subscription...

GEORGE EDWARDS.

...As a subscriber of long-standing I was outraged by the low quality of the letters from subscribers expressing outrage at the cover of issue 1121. Mind you, if you'd published that cover in the parts of the US that voted heavily for Bush – known to the rest of us over here as "Jesusland", "Dumbfuckistan", or, more simply, "The former slave states" – you'd have all been strung up double quick and no mistake...

PROF. CATHERINE ATHERTON.

...I am the youngest (at 46) member of a patchwork and quilting group of six ladies living in a rural area – the oldest member is 84, and several of the group are practising Christians – and all of us hooted with laughter at the cover, and then enjoyed a good session trashing that bunny boiler, David Blunkett... You weren't taking the mickey out of Christianity, you were taking it out of Blunkett! If seven middle-aged-to-elderly ladies can figure this out, what's wrong with your correspondents?...

VICTORIA DALE.

...I found the letters complaining about the cover of issue 1121 somewhat offensive – particularly those that said you wouldn't dare do a similar cover with Islamic symbolism. Don't Christians have the guts to make their own death threats?...

RICHARD WILKINSON.

...If one cannot distinguish between the means to a satirical attack and its actual target then surely it is better to know your limits and stick to reading Bunty or The Young Soldier. The other notion, that you are somehow too "scared" to go after well-deserving Mohammedan targets, is simply not borne out by your recent commentaries and cartoons on the likes of Arafat, Al-Qa'ida etc...

S. DEWHURST.

... If other faith systems refuse to laugh at themselves and have to resort to fatwahs or other forms of unacceptable protest (like the Sikh protests concerning "that" play) then more fool them. It says a lot more about the insecurity of their own personal experience of faith than it does about the sacredness of the faith system in question. Christianity doesn't need to act that way. As a religious system it is more than able to roll with any punches that are thrown its way...

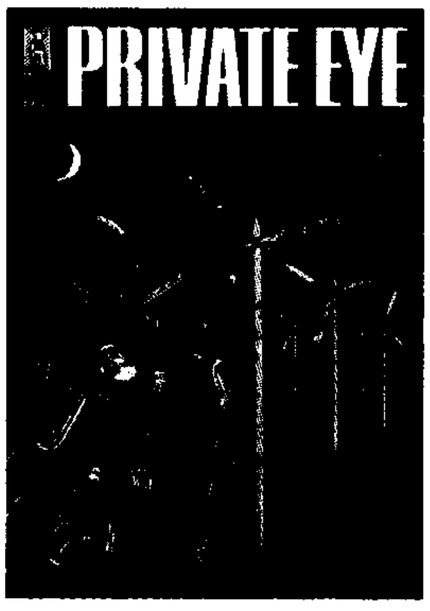
REVD. JOHN NUGENT.

... As an Anglican (which I suppose by current fanatical standards hardly qualifies as a religion, does it?) I have always considered paintings and sculptures to be mere depictions, and I chuckled at your very apt use of one of what must be thousands of pictorial representations of the birth of Christ. The religious content was not the point of the joke, but the season rendered its employment perfectly appropriate to the passing moment...

PETER SMITH.

...Congratulations on your brilliantly preposterous Christmas Special cover. It made me laugh out loud when I first saw it and I feel confident that it has made Heaven roar with laughter too...

MAX GAMMON.



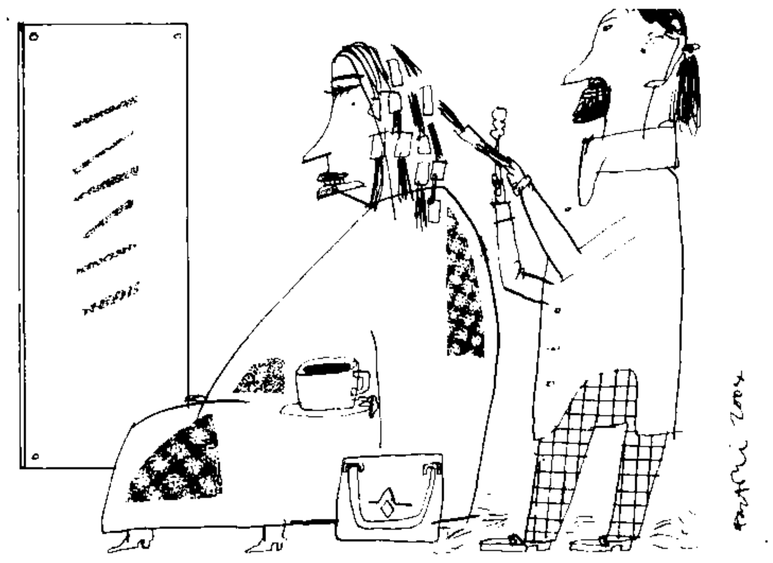
...I notice that you are again at risk of offending a significant part of your readership by the ill-advised choice of cover. I speak of those who hold a long established belief in Father Christmas. The depiction of their icon being brutally mutilated, especially at this most significant of times, indicates that you are guilty of insensitivity and gross intolerance for other minority's beliefs and values...

STEVE DOWD.

...To use a picture of Our Lord Father Christmas and his Holy Reindeer being torn limb from limb while flying over a wind farm is inappropriate and blasphemous...

ALISTAIR LAWRENCE.

Scenes You Seldom See



*"**My** children, **my** holidays, **my** husband... I'd so much prefer to talk about you"*

...It is normally a pleasure to catch the amusing cover of Private Eye but this week it was a real pity to see you portraying wind turbines as Santa killers. It is hard enough persuading people that wind power is a good thing without that. It is certainly not the long term answer but it represents a fantastic mid-term stopgap while we develop alternatives to fossil fuels...

ED GRATTAN.

...I did not regard the Nativity scene cover as any more offensive than usual, but found issue 1122 quite unpleasant on account of at least three drawings depicting violence as funny. The cover with Santa and the reindeers chopped to bits, Supermodels with the skinning of a reindeer and the Eye subscription ad with the dog tearing off the postman's arm were simply off-putting. Blasphemy can be funny sometimes, violence never...

PEKKA SAURI.

...The Nativity cover was in the most wonderful bad taste, quite brilliant I thought. The cover of 1122 is repulsive and sickening. In other words, equally brilliant. If I didn't have a subscription I would take one out immediately...

REVD. TERRY HURST.

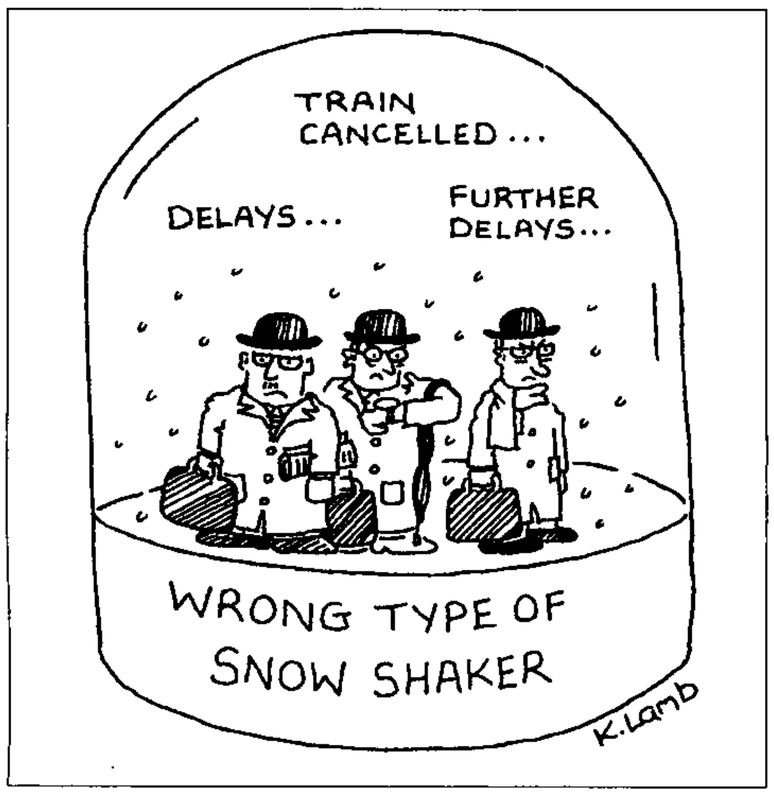
...The cover of Eye 1122 is shocking! Shurely you should realise by now that Tellytubbies are oh-so-passé and that Santa's sack of toys should contain at least one Bratz doll?...

CAMERON KERR.

...The intermittent raft of subscription-cancelling letters from irked and pompous readers never cease to amuse. After many years of enjoying your organ, however, I am beginning to doubt their authenticity, concluding that they are another of your famous in-jokes. If you fail to print this letter, I will know that I am onto the truth...

PHILIP BEER.

● Thanks for the hundreds of similar letters. Ed.



Man for the jobby

Sir,

I read your article "The Turd Way" (Rotten Boroughs, Eye 1121) and, as an operator of a public swimming pool, I would like to correct the issue raised, with regard to dealing with a stool in the pool, otherwise known as a "jobby" up here in Scotland. The story claims: "Health and Safety regulations require a pool to be closed in such circumstances until all the water has been filtered and cleared". If this was the case, then there would hardly be a pool open.

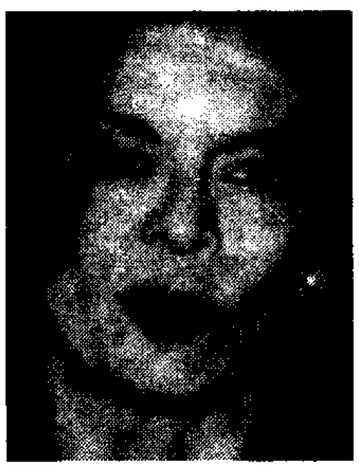
The following is the guidelines taken from the HSE publication "Managing Health and Safety in swimming pools" 2003: "Solid faeces should be removed from the pool as quickly as possible. No other action is necessary as long as the disinfection levels in the pool are within the range of the pool and it is possible to retrieve all the material. Any diarrhoeal fouling is likely to contain bacteria and viruses; this is when the pool should be closed and filtering and backwashing takes place."

It is not unknown for mischievous lifeguards to drop the odd chocolate bar into the water and await the swimmers' reaction. A Lion or Topic are preferred.

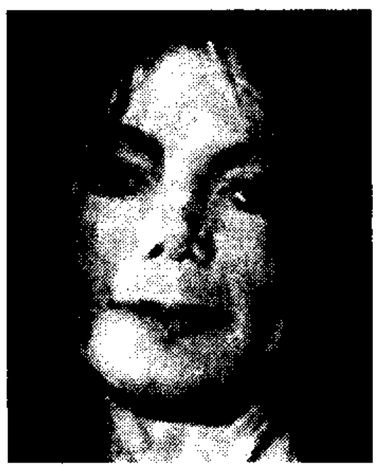
Yours,
DAVID WELSH (Duty Officer – it's a shit job),

Coatbridge, Lanarkshire.

Lookalike



Jackson



Jagger

Sir,

Your readers may be interested in the striking resemblance between Mr Michael Jackson and Ms Bianca Jagger. I wonder if, perchance, they are related?

Yours sincerely,
DR CHRIS SOLOMON,

Graveney, Kent.

SOLUTIONS

"Lowepro Vision: Carrying Solutions for the Imaging World" – *camera bags*

"Cell Pack Solutions" – *batteries*

"Sustainable Drainage Solutions" – *drains*

"BT voice solutions" – *phone lines*

"Total document solutions" – *paper and ink for computer printers*

"Featherweight solutions for dark places"– *torches*

"Magnet Kitchens' Smart Space Solutions" – *cupboards*

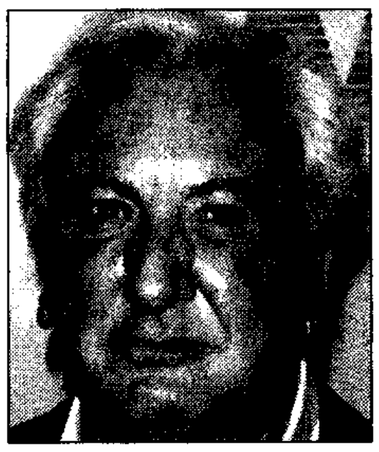
"Pirtek Fluid Transfer Solutions" – *hoses*

"The TMK Motorized Impeller, another Air Moving Solution" – *fan*

All submitted by readers

Lookalike

Winner



Henry VIII

Sir,

I enclose a portrait of His Late Majesty King Henry VIII, scourge of popes, wives and monks, as sketched by Cornelys Matsys, and a Sunday Times photograph of Mr Michael Winner, gore-fest film director, insurance salesman and scourge of restaurateurs.

Could they be in any way related or – even more horrifically – could one be a reincarnation of the other?

I'd rather not be told.

Yours,
ANON,

London.

Not me, Jimmy

Sir,

Vile – if you say so (Eye 1122). Lavish – not as often as I should like. But McTavish? Shurely shome mishtake?

Could you, by any chance, have been referring to someone else?

Yours incredulously,
GEOFFREY LEVY,

Daily Mail.

Colemanballs

£10 paid for contributions

"I don't think players care too much about stats and statistics..."
ASHLEY COLE, BBC
(Jonathan Chadwick)

"He [Paul Dickov] has worked his legs off..."
LAWRIE SANCHEZ, Radio 5 Live
(Terry Rudden)

"He knows his limitations and he just sticks to them."
MIKE GATTING, Radio 4
(Robert Pirrie)

"[The pitch is] as flat as a dodo."
DAVID LLOYD
(G. Cogan)

"I don't want to sound homophobic, but I want a Scottish manager."
PAT NEVIN, Radio 5 Live
(Roger Waite)

"It's obviously very good, but I'm not quite sure I understand it"

Brought to book

Sir,

I see (Eye 1121) that you've made your annual discovery of "log rolling" in the Books of the Year round-ups. They say that there are no more than six degrees of separation between each of us and anyone else in the world. On the London literary scene that figure must drop almost to one. It would be as hard for them to find a book that was written or published by someone with whom they were not connected as it would be for the rest of us to find anyone who actually reads Books of the Year features. Still, thanks for the revelation, and if you find out anything about the religious affiliation of His Holiness or the excretory habits of bears, do pass it on.

KEITH NORMAN,

Oxford.

Sir,

Bookworm rightly berates "the infallible habit of pundits to approve the books of people who write for the same newspaper" (Eye 1121). Surprisingly, then, your next issue quotes a Daily Telegraph testimonial for Craig Brown's new Eye book. Of course, Brown is a long-standing Telegraph columnist.

Yours faithfully,
DR ALEX MAY,

Holloway, London.

Sir,

While taking to task those authors who seasonally butter up their fellows, quoting John Mortimer and Ruth Rendell, John Major and William Hague (Eye 1122), your writer accuses Richard Holloway of being 'equally snug' in hoping to see published 'a lovingly written biography' of the Scottish poet Norman MacCaig. I'm not sure what 'favours in return' Holloway is alleged to be expecting here as MacCaig died in 1996... but of course your writer knew that...

Yours,
A.H. RONALD,

Via email.

● Apologies to Richard Holloway. The reference to him was cut and mixed with another sentence in production and therefore makes no sense at all.

HOM SAP

AUSTIN

Letter from **Harare**

from Our Own Correspondent

HAPPY NEW YEAR from Zimbabwe, a land in a ferment of female emancipation. Our president created history last month by confirming Comrade Joyce Mujuru in the post of second vice-president, the first time a woman has risen so high in our revolutionary government.

Reading the acres of advertisements taken out in the press to congratulate Comrade Joyce – by everyone from the forestry commission to Standard Chartered Bank – one starts to wonder if this hitherto overlooked earth mother is going to turn the country round single-handedly. As the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Company trumpets, it is a great achievement for all Zimbabwe's women.

The hysteria has been stoked by Mugabe's comment at Comrade Joyce's swearing-in that she must aim higher still. After tactfully pointing out her relative youth, which contradicts her girth – "Don't be deceived by that body. She is still young" – he hinted that vice-president shouldn't be the limits of her ambition.

Not everyone, though, is convinced that Mugabe's bedtime reading suddenly includes *The Second Sex* or *The Female Eunuch*. His real motive, claim political observers, is to find an ABM – Anyone But Mnangagwa. They are referring to Emmerson Mnangagwa, the man who so effectively directed the plundering of the Congo's diamonds when Mugabe sent Zimbabwean troops there, and who was until a few months ago the heir apparent. But Mugabe surprised everyone in November by sending out a decree that all the provinces should back a woman candidate for the vacant post of vice-president. It was clear that Mnangagwa was no longer the chosen one. When Mnangagwa plotted with information minister Jonathan Moyo to defy the woman-only rule, he and his fellow plotters were publicly humiliated and downgraded within the party.

Mujuru may be a big lady but she is no political big beast. Indeed, since fighting in the liberation struggle as a girl and joining Mugabe's first cabinet in 1980 her career has been notable only for two embarrassments. As information minister she tried and failed to block the entrepreneur Strive Masiyiwa from starting a private mobile phone network. She had been supporting a rival bid by the president's nephew, Leo Mugabe. And then there was the scam in which she and other ministers received massive disability payouts for their war years from the corrupt doctor and "war veteran" Chenjerai "Hitler" Hunzvi. She pocketed around £17,000 for "poor vision" and "mental stress disorder".

So why Comrade Joyce? Many believe the answer lies with her husband. Retired general Solomon Mujuru led Mugabe's Zanla rebels out of the bush and put down an attempted revolt against his master in 1978. During the 1980s as army commander he amassed a fortune through arms procurement deals. He is still hugely influential and after the president perhaps the most powerful figure in the politburo. Having announced his exit date as 2008, Mugabe is becoming increasingly anxious about the Young Turks looking to take his crown. He feels far more comfortable surrounded by the Old Guard and the Mujurus fit the mould perfectly. Or they do for the moment. Mugabe does what is necessary at the time. With Comrade Joyce and not Mnangagwa as VP he feels safe for a few more years. A little feminism goes a long way in Zimbabwe.

FUNNY OLD WORLD

COMPILED BY **VICTOR LEWIS-SMITH**

● "Who gives a damn what other people think?" Kura Tumanako told reporters in Hastings, Victoria. "It's my life, my responsibility, I make my own choices. I want to raise my baby girl and my puppy together, and I want him to protect her as they grow up. So I've been breastfeeding both of them for the past few weeks and, as you can see, they relish every drop."

Questioned about her unusual method of nourishing her young Staffordshire bull terrier, Ms Tumanako continued feeding her puppy and baby as she replied, "I started doing it because my baby couldn't drink all my milk, so I was having to squirt half of it away in the sink. I didn't want to waste it, so I gave it to Honey Boy to see if he'd like it. He was instantly hooked, and he's been on two feeds a day ever since. He drinks more than the baby, and his teeth are starting to come through, but it doesn't hurt me when he sucks, it's just a bit ticklish. I'll probably wean him onto solid food in about six weeks, and put her onto bottled milk at the same time. But, for now, I've got more than enough milk for two. In my book, that's ecology in action."

Jeff Sissons, associate professor of anthropology at Victoria University, said, "It is not uncommon in Papua New Guinea for women to breastfeed pigs, but I have not heard of humans breastfeeding any other species before." Hastings veterinarian Sharon Marshall added, "From a veterinarian viewpoint it's always better for a species to have its own milk. But it's not going to hurt the puppy, and there's no cruelty issue as such. I would be more concerned about the hygiene issues for any baby sharing the same nipples." *(Dominion Post, 17/11/04. Spotters: Stella Bensemann and Alan Ball)*

– ● –

● *The following is a list of the average rates currently payable to student guinea pigs at US universities:*

Watching video clips: $10 (US) an hour;

Providing vaginal swabs and wearing a diaphragm for six hours: $17 an hour;

Quitting smoking: $25 a day;

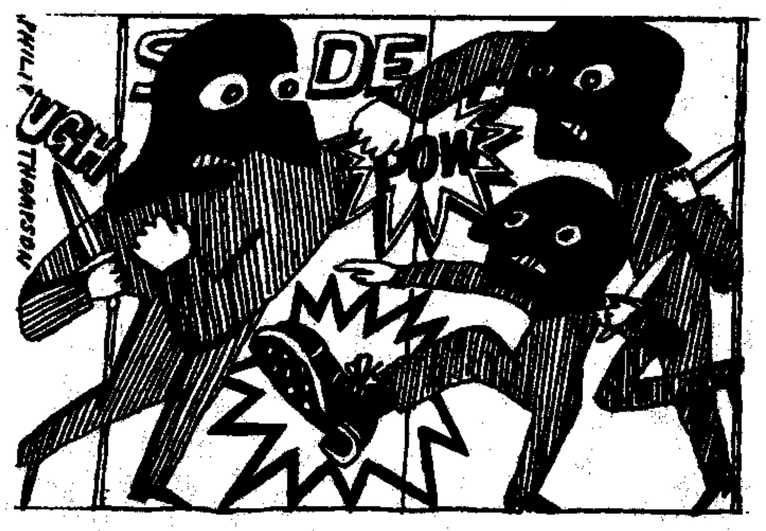
Discussing your relationship with your partner: $150;

Not sleeping, then getting your brain scanned: $300 a night;

Receiving four rectal exams and providing 39 semen samples: $45. (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 22/10/04. Spotter: Wallace Brown)

– ● –

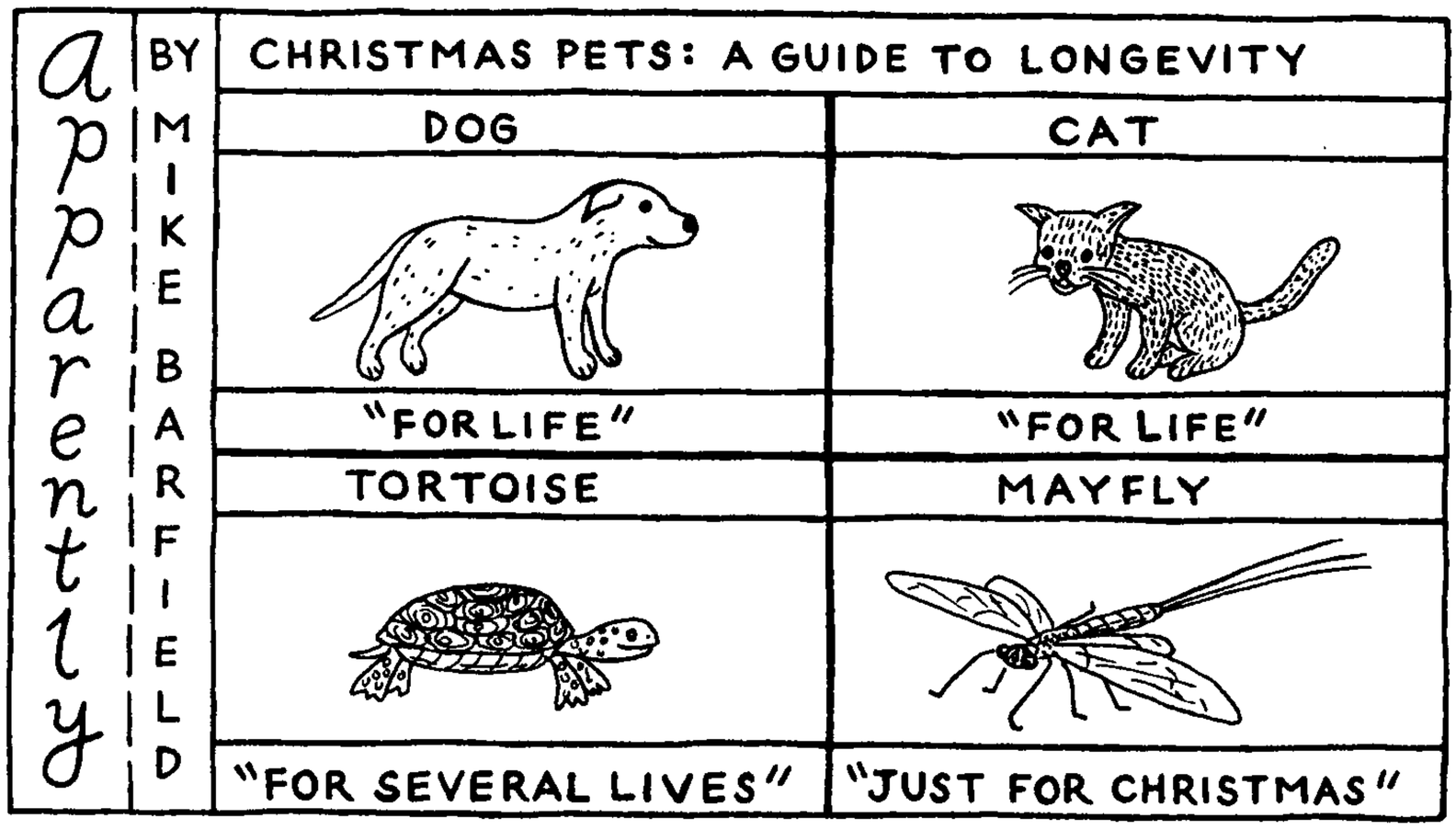
● "It was not a very professional operation, more like something The Three Stooges might have planned," Greg Moore told reporters gathered at GM's Restaurant in Gerringong, near Lake Illawarra. "We could see they intended to attack us, but they were so inept that they never even managed to get inside, let alone rob us. And, although our customers were a bit concerned at first, by the



time the robbers gave up everybody inside was treating the attack like a comedy show."

Moore then explained what had happened when the three hooded men had appeared at the glass front door of GM's Restaurant. "The door was slightly open, and there's a big sign on it saying 'SLIDE', but either they couldn't read or else their balaclavas had affected their eyesight. Whatever the reason, they stood in front of it for quite a while, scratching their heads. For some reason they seemed convinced that it was a swing door, and they kept trying to push it open. They pushed it, shook it, punched it, pulled it, shoulder-charged it, and even began kicking it, but it never occurred to them to slide it sideways. They had knives, and looked menacing, but by the time they gave up in frustration and drove off crestfallen, the customers were openly laughing at them.

"They were stupid criminals, no doubt about it, but, then again, they're probably more dangerous because they're dumb." *(Illawarra Mercury, 23/11/04. Spotter: Ewen Hill)*



ST ALBION PARISH NEWS

Incumbent: Rev A.R.P. Blair MA (Oxon)

A STRONGLY WORDED NOTE FROM MR PRESCOTT OF THE WORKING MEN'S CLUB

A lot of people in the parish have criticised the vicar quite unreservedly for staying on holiday when there are urgent matters requiring his immediate detention at home. This is totally unfair and unwarrantied. The vicar and his good lady deserve a break as much as anyone else and it is quite disappropriate for people to circumcize them for having a nice time on the beach in a swanky resort for nobs whilst some people are left to do all the work as per bloody usual with no thanks at the end of it!

Let me insure you all that actually things have been working very smoothly here in the vicar's abstention thanks to yours truly being in charge.

In fact a number of people have been kind enough to say to me that if the vicar decided to stay in Egypt forever sunning himself for health reasons then no one would do a better job than me (Thanks Mrs Prescott!).

So let that be an end to this malitious criticism of the vicar and let's all concentrate on making this a great new year for St Albion's.

Yours in charge,
John Prescott

PS. Here is a transcript of an interview given to Mr Snow from our local hospital radio station down the phone from the vicar – just to reassure the more scepticised amongst you that all is fine!

"There is no need for anyone to panic, Jon as I am in constant touch with everyone around the world all the time. To be honest Jon, the fact that I am on holiday makes no difference at all since I might as well be at my desk that is how in touch I am. So don't ask me if I am in touch Jon because I'm more in touch than if I was in my office with all those other things to distract me. No, I'm doing a great job here which is why I'll be flying home as soon as possible. Happy New Year to all your listeners"

EXCLUSIVE

The sermon the vicar gave from the Holy Land at Christmas! Only in the St Albion parish newsletter!

Hullo!

And let me say how thrilled I am to be delivering these words from a place which we all think about every Christmas holiday!

I mean, of course, the Holy Land, which for far too many years has been associated in our minds with wars and conflicts!

Many good men over the years (and of course women!) have tried to bring peace to this troubled land, including my very good ex-friend the Rev. Jefferson Clintstone of the Church of the Seven-Day Fornicators, and my current good friend, the Rev. Dubya of the Church of the Latter-Day Morons.

But, sad to say, every single one of them failed, which means that the people of this land are still looking for that long-promised saviour who will sort the whole thing out once and for all, so that you can all draw a line under it and move on!

As it was written, "And one shall come who shall be called Wonderful, the Privy Councillor, the Prince of Peace".

Well, I was pondering on those wise words a little while back, taken from the Book of the Lord Levyticus, and I thought to myself, "Hey! That rings something of a bell!".

And without wanting to blow my own trumpet, I realised that there is probably only one person around at the moment who could honestly say, "I'm the man for the job!".

So that's why I decided that this Christmas, instead of just sitting around at home, watching television and eating too many mince pies (no offence to our friend, Mr Prescott!), I should get out here to the Middle East and knock a few heads together, until you come to your senses! (no offence, obviously!)

My plan was simple! I would invite the two sides to sit round the table with me back in St Albion's, and we would jolly well sit there all night, if necessary, until we'd found the solution that everybody wants!

And that's precisely what's going to happen! Except that, unfortunately, one side has told me that they are not going to come to the talks. And neither is the other.

But that doesn't mean to say that we won't achieve anything!

On the contrary, I think it marks a really positive start! At least both sides are totally agreed on one thing, and that must be good news!

As we say over here, "Shalom" – which is the local way of saying "Happy New Year"!

© *T.Blair 2005*

JANUARY BOOK SALE!!

Due to the huge success of Cherie's wonderful book Ten Famous Vicars' Wives (by Mrs Booth, with additional material supplied by Mrs Bragg, although obviously Cherie wrote the lion's share!), we are happy to be able to announce a special offer of signed copies of this must-read best-seller at only 30p per copy. As Cherie herself points out, this is terrific value, and we hope that as many of you as possible will come along to our January 'Bring and Buy Sale' (you bring the money and then you buy the book!). Mr Milburn will be keeping a record of all parishioners who have felt themselves unable to support this very good cause! T.B.

CORRECTION:

Some parishioners seem to have got the wrong impression from our last newsletter that Mr Blunkett has somehow "lost his job " on the PCC. Nothing could be further from the truth. As we all know, David has been working very hard on all our behalfs in recent years, and just before Christmas he came to me saying that he was very tired (or "shagged out" as he put it, in his direct Northern dialect!) and could he therefore have my permission to take a 'sabbatical' (from the Greek 'sabbatikos', 'sabba' meaning slap, and 'tikkos', tickle). David plans to take a few months off, to "recharge his batteries", and will be working from home (his own, or possibly someone else's!). But I am sure you will be delighted to know that David will, in due course, be rejoining our team ministry, with a new job description, possibly in a very senior position indeed! Well done, David, great to have you back! (Not that you've been away!) T.B.

Scenes from Parish Life No. 94

The Vicar collects together all the "black sheep" of the parish and brings them back into the fold! as seen by local artist Mr de la Nougerede

THE SABBATH TIMES

Friday, January 7, 2005 — 2 Shekels

Flood Catastrophe Latest

WORST DISASTER IN HISTORY OF WORLD

Many Britons Feared Dead

by Our Man on the Ark **Noah**

FOLLOWING the greatest flood the world has ever known, fears were mounting last night that many British citizens may have perished in the huge natural catastrophe that has over-taken the entire globe.

As I look out from the crowded deck of the ark, writes *Sabbath Times* man Noah, it has become increasingly clear that everyone in the world except me has been washed away by the unprecedented rise in sea levels.

This leads me to the horrifying conclusion that the death toll is likely to include many Britons, possibly all of them.

And why was there no warning of the disaster? Last night this was denied by a spokesman for God, my father Noah.

Speaking from the bridge of the Ark, at a press conference attended by myself and my brothers Shem and Japheth, Noah claimed that "mankind was given ample warning, as it happens. I myself issued a number of weather forecasts, predicting continuous rain for forty days.

"But mankind was too busy whoring after strange gods."

'I Blame God'

Says Top Sabbath Times Columnist, Ham

AS THE full scale of the catastrophe which has wiped out mankind began to sink in yesterday, attention began to focus on the mysterious figure who is believed to have been responsible for the flood.

I can reveal that the 'Deluge' was not a freak act of nature, as some have claimed, but a carefully orchestrated act of God.

Questions are already being asked at the highest level – well, nearly at the highest level – as to why the so-called Almighty caused the flood to happen, fully aware that it would lead to widespread loss of life.

Profile

The Great Survivor

WHO is he, the only man in the world left alive? Noah, 81, is a tall, distinguished, bearded man, with a lifelong interest in animal welfare and DIY.

Happily married, with a wife and three sons, he *(cont. p. 94)*

BUSH SLAMS 'ACT OF TERROR'

by Our Political Staff **Eartha Quake**

THE President of the United States today hit out at those responsible for what he called "the worst terrorist outrage since 9/11".

He told a White House press conference, "We don't yet know who these tsunami guys are, but I tell you, we will hunt them down to the end of the earth".

CORRECTION

The President later issued a clarification, claiming that he had been misquoted by himself.

"What the President intended to say," explained his press secretary Myra Gaffe, "was that he is promising free and fair elections in Tsunamia as soon as he can find it on the map."

'I BLAME NO ONE'

Says No One

by Our Scientific Staff
Phil Space

IN THE wake of the worst natural disaster for half a century, no one today decided that the main person to blame was no one.

However, a spokesman was quick to refute these claims, saying "It must be someone's fault, surely? What about the Archbishop of Canterbury? I blame him for *(cont. p. 94)*

Daily Mail

Tsunami Special

AREN'T WE MARVELLOUS?

by Our Entire Staff

THE GREAT news coming out of the admittedly sad Indian Ocean disaster is that the Daily Mail Flood Appeal is a huge success.

Loads of ordinary Daily Mail readers are giving money to our Daily Mail Appeal (rather than just giving it to the charities direct) and, even better, lots of celebrities are very generously allowing us to put their names on the front page of the Daily Mail in return for a donation. So, hat's off to ourselves at the Daily Mail for our amazing self-promotion *(surely selflessness?')*.

ON OTHER PAGES ● Is there a God? Celebs ask the Big Question! **12** **● Will the Tsunami cause House Prices to Fall? 94**

HUGE WAVE OF MONEY FAILS TO ENGULF DISASTER ZONES

by Our Catastrophe Staff **Sue Nami**

A WORLDWIDE wave of money officially pledged by hundreds of governments yesterday failed to reach the stricken areas of Asia.

Said one onlooker in the Thai resort of Phukall, "The wave was tiny. Just a few million pounds. It's a disaster. We're just waiting here on the beach hoping for the big wave of money given by ordinary individuals to arrive, since the governmental response has *(cont. p94)*

TV Highlights
What You Missed

Not only Bad, but also Unfunny (Channel 4)

STUNNINGLY revealing and accurate new bio-pic portrays the late Peter Cook as he really was – a twisted, malevolent wife beater who may well have been Jack the Ripper. Actor Dai Charmless gives an uncanny portrayal of an unpleasant and humourless man possessed by inner demons whose only desire was to murder his diminutive comic partner, the abused paraplegic Dudley Moore played by Argle McGargle. We trace Cook's life from his early days at Eton through Oxford and the great Spotlight Revue where he teamed up with David Frost and Christine Keeler for the immortal Edinburgh show "Beyond a Joke". From there it was all downhill as Cook drank, took drugs and married various women until his death thirty years later. He never produced another joke.

THOSE BIRTHDAY HONOURS

Dame Sadie DBE

Dog of the British Empire. For services to David Blunkett, formerly Home Secretary.

Sir John Stooge KFC

Permanent Secretary at the Home Office. For services to the Whitewash Industry, with particular reference to David Blunkett.

Simon Hoggart NBG

For services to Mrs Kimberly Quinn and for taking the heat off David Blunkett.

(Continued from p. 1)

for services to lawn mower manufacture in Solihull

ASBO (Civil)

R.C.B. Pen-Pusher, Senior Social Security Benefit Officer, New Malden; **R.J.Y. Chatterjee,** Assistant Equality Officer for Community Welfare Development Trust, Nuneaton; **Mrs R.R.R. Expectorant-Smith**, Regional Services Director of the Walsall Health Trust Plc.

MSRA (Overseas)

Lady Tunku Starborgling, Services to Public Libraries in Papua New Guinea; **J.P. 'Mungo' McShagger**, Services to the Kelp Industry, Falkland Islands; **P.D. O'Phile** Lord Mayor of Pitcairn.

OBN (Queen's Division)

Sir A.P. St J. Fotherington-Barkworth, Keeper of the Flannel, Balmoral Castle; **Lady Magnesia Lazard-Stinkpole**, Mistress of the Mistress's Wardrobe, Highgrove; **Detective Inspector J.J.Q. McKnacker**, Personal Security Attendant to His Royal Highness Prince Lager *(cont. p. 94)*

GLITTERING LIST OF BLAIR'S DINNER GUESTS REVEALED

by Our Political Staff **Dinnertime O'Booze**

UNDER THE new Freedom of Information Act details have become public of the extraordinary array of guests that have been entertained by the Blairs at their country house, Chequers.

THAT STAR-STUDDED LIST IN FULL

Monty Greed from C&B Clothing (Retailer) **Don O'Pullover** (TV Chat Show Host) **Ron Knee** (Legendary Manager) **Roxanna Slapper** (Partner of above) **Sir Simon Carpark** (Industrialist) **Bonio** (Rock Star) **Kevin Filth** (Editor of the Daily Smut) **Lord Bracegirdle** (Senior Diplomat) **Sharon Legz** (Film Actress) **Sir Raymond Spud** (Oven-Ready-Chip Magnate) **Sindy Sin** (Lead Singer of the Sins) **Monsieur Thierry Gauloises de Gitane** (Tobacco Lobbyist) *(That's enough star-studded names.)*

NEW KINNOCK SHOCK

MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS 'FORGOTTEN'

by Our Religious Staff
Tesc O'Booze and Terry Waitrose

HAS the Britain of today lost touch with the essential meaning of Christmas?

Judging by the evidence of the past month, the answer is tragically 'yes'.

In times past, the whole nation would join together in a celebration of spending.

High streets and shopping malls were packed to bursting, with happy families merrily handing over stacks of money to fill their car boots with piles of gifts that symbolised the ancient meaning of Christmas.

The Lolly and the Gravy

But this year, in what was described as "the worst Christmas ever", attendances at shops declined to a record low level.

Only a few elderly people were still prepared to brave the overheated supermarkets in their attempt to keep alive the spirit of what Christmas used to be all about.

The disheartened chairman of one retail chain said last night, "It is all very sad. No longer can it be said that we are a shop-going nation. Children grow up these days without any concept of the central part that Christmas shop-attendance used to play in our national life."

"We are gathered here to celebrate the birth of little Asbo, named after his father who unfortunately is unable to be with us today"

POLLY FILLER

LOOKING after the kids at this time of year is a real nightmare, but thank heavens there's a heartwarming family musical back in the West End! Hoorah for Mary Poppins! It's about time we had a show that reaffirms the message that we should spend more time with our children. Mary Poppins brings a warm glow to even the most icy of hearts and everyone responds to its charm. My toddler Charlie absolutely loved it and has been singing the "Super-cali-whatever-it-is (!)" song round the house ever since!

It was just a shame that I couldn't take him myself, as I was too busy meeting publishing deadlines for my new bestseller *Mummy Doesn't Grow On Trees* (out in May!) and on top of that I had an important networking party in the evening!! And of course the useless Simon obviously couldn't take Charlie because he was busy being useless (or distributing food parcels for the homeless, as he selfishly puts it).

SO, INSTEAD, it fell to the new Nanny, Mary (who the agency flew in at short notice, thank goodness!) to take Charlie to this wonderful Christmas treat!

And it made me think thank goodness for nannies like Mary who are prepared to work long hours for minimal wages and to do it for love. And that's not a word we hear enough about, is it?

Sorry, I've got to go now and ask Mary to take Charlie out to fly his new kite!

Happy New Year!

© Polly Filler

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Names of the year

From The Rev. Harry Potter

Sir, As is customary at this time of year, I have pleasure in presenting your readers with the results of my annual compilation of the most popular names of 2004, based on your invaluable register of births.

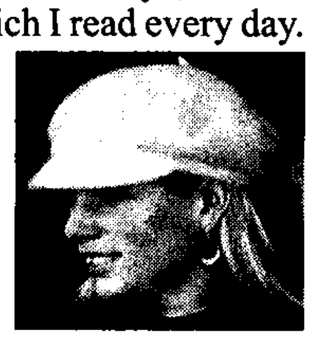
Boys	Girls
Mr Incredible	Elastigirl
Wayne	Kelly
Shrek	Kimberly
Yuschenko	Nigella
Boris	Petronella
Sven	Blunketta
Iyad	Coleen
Humvee	Faria
Aled	Loos
Tesco	Lady Lucinda Worsthorne

Yours faithfully,
THE REV. HARRY POTTER,
Ecclestone, Beds.

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

WE ARE pleased to announce that the next four issues of Private Eye will have a guest editor chosen by our readers, each with his or her own particular concerns about the world we live in.

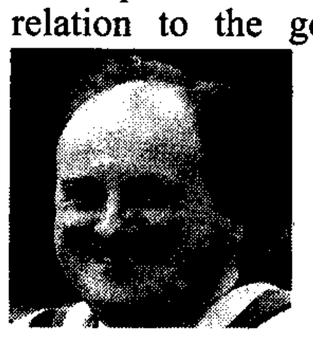
1 Zara Phillips She says, "I love the Eye, which I read every day. But I would like it to focus more on rugby and horses, which are, you know, a big issue for a lot of people. I am hoping to interview Jonny Wilkinson and Sir Desert Orchid."



2 Benjamin Zephaniah He says, "I hate the Eye, which is a relic of British imperialism. My issue will be completely blank in protest."

3 Barbara Amiel She says, "I never read Private Eye after its repeated attacks on shoes. My guest-editorship will give me the chance to redress the balance by putting in a whole lot of pro-shoe pieces. I am hoping to interview Imelda Marcos."

4 Jim Naughtie He says, "I think the Eye needs to be more positive. Particularly with relation to the government. It's not all bad, you know. My issue will include a four-page interview by myself with Alan Milburn, in which I will impartially set out the case for supporting Tony Blair at the next election, giving him a brief moment at the end to agree with my masterly analysis."



DON'T MISS YOUR NEW GUEST-EDITED 'EYE'

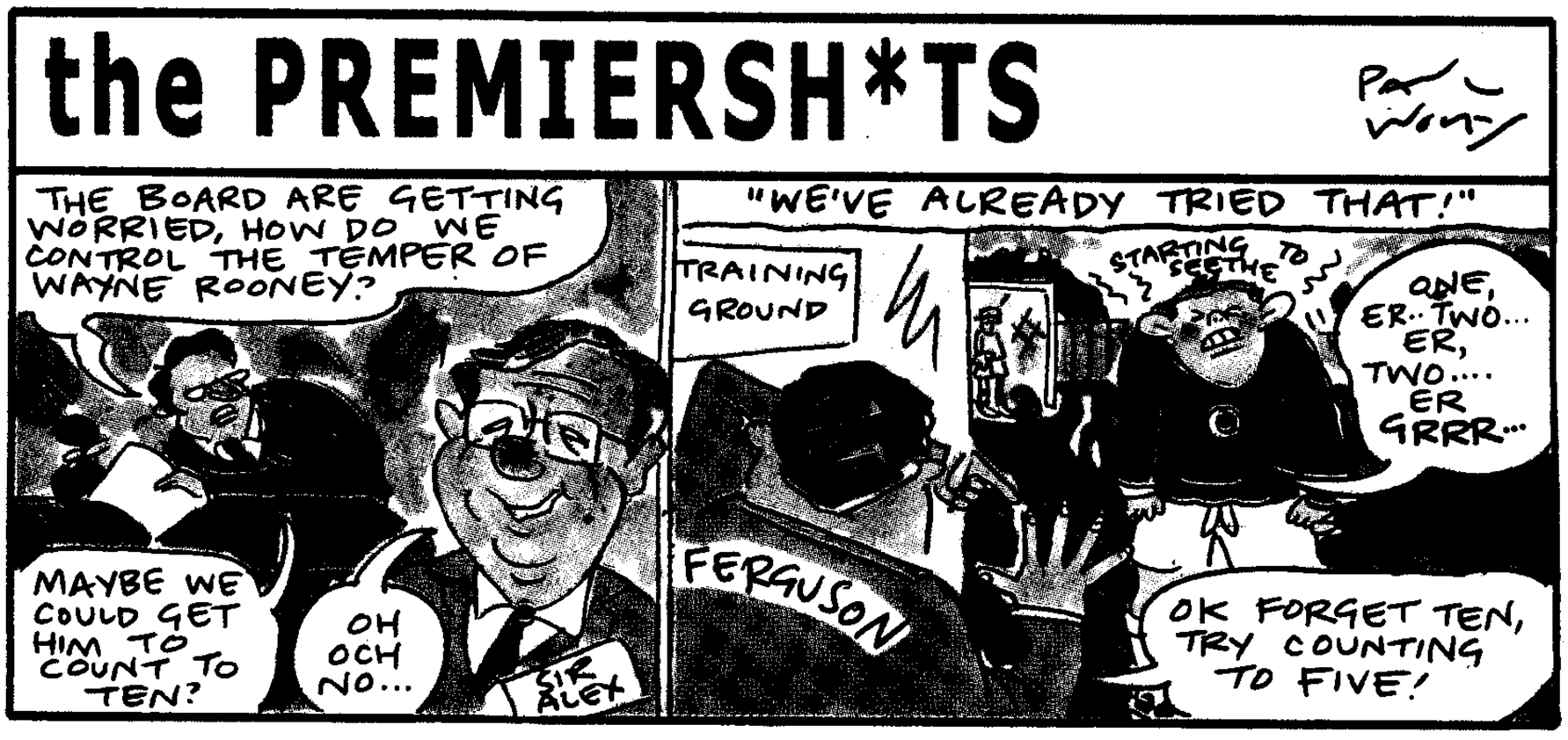
A New Look For A New Year

Apology – Charity Appeal

Dinner with Mary-Ann Bighead

We regret to announce that since none of our readers bid for this offer we are withdrawing it from the charity auction.

It is to be replaced by a new offer of the chance to lunch with Political Editor Michael Dull.

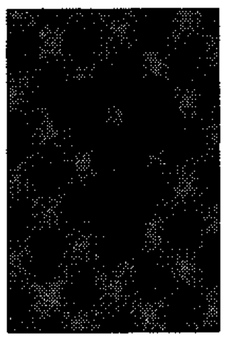

the PREMIERSH*TS
THE BOARD ARE GETTING WORRIED, HOW DO WE CONTROL THE TEMPER OF WAYNE ROONEY?
MAYBE WE COULD GET HIM TO COUNT TO TEN?
OH OCH NO...
SIR ALEX
"WE'VE ALREADY TRIED THAT!"
TRAINING GROUND
FERGUSON
STARTING TO SEETHE
ONE, ER.. TWO... ER, TWO.... ER GRRR...
OK FORGET TEN, TRY COUNTING TO FIVE!

GRAND SPECTATOR NEW YEAR COMPETITION

WHO do you think is the famous "Fifth Man"?

The names of four of Kimberly Quinn's lovers have already been identified.

But who was the fifth? And, indeed, the sixth, the seventh or the eighth?



Is it:

a) Boris Johnson
b) Lord Weidenfeld
c) TV's Charles Moore
d) Tony Blair
e) Bernie Ecclestone
f) Mike Gatting
g) Paul Burrell
h) Imran Khan
i) Lord Hutton
j) Jamie Oliver
k) Brian Sewell

Winner gets a year's subscription to the Spectator! Runner-up gets two years subscription to the Spectator!!

New Words

Hoggart (n): an unlikely or improbable lover. "That boring-looking man in the glasses is her hoggart" *(The Siege of Kimberly, 1879)*

Hoggart (vb): to issue violent denials of something that turns out to be true (see hogwash). "He tried to hoggart his way out of it, but his wife wasn't fooled for a moment" *(The Spectators, C.P. Snow, 1954)*

Hoggarts (proper noun): fictional school for wizards, where pupils learn to conjure up articles out of nothing, mocking politicians for their sexual foibles. *(Taken from Harry Potter And The Guardian of Humbug, 2002)*

What You Didn't Hear
Radio 4

The News Quiz, 12.27am

(Silly music)

Voiceover: ...and here's your chairman, Simon Hoggart!

(Applause)

Hoggart: Which journalist this week **hogg-ed** the limelight and made an **art** of himself? Alan?

Coren: Is this the one about the one-legged zebra that escaped from the zoo?

Hoggart: No, it isn't.

Francis Wheen *(for it is he)*: Is it the one about you getting your leg over...?

Hoggart: Well, that's all we've got time for this week.

(Silly music. Ends)

XMAS BAZAAR
Church Hall, Holy Rosary Church
Brixton SW9
Saturday 4th Dec
11-2
Usual Stools
S. London Press

"I've got this dreadful headache"

BLUNKETT 'TO RETURN TO GOVERNMENT IMMEDIATELY'

by Our Political Staff

THE former Cabinet Minister David Blunkett will shortly return to a senior position in Government and will soon be at Blair's side again, according to a highly-placed source.

"David is such a brilliant minister that Tony cannot survive long without him," said the source. "Tony never wanted David to go and can't wait for him to come back to the Cabinet with a top job – possibly Home Secretary, Chancellor or Deputy Prime Minister."

The source concluded, "There is no doubt about it. The Prime Minister has totally forgiven me, I mean, he has totally forgiven David, and if he has not given him a job by February, my name is not David Blunkett. Which of course it isn't."

Yes! It's your guide to the socio-economic group that everyone is talking about

THE DAVS

What is a Dav?

DAV is an abbreviation of "David Thomas" and it stands for huge space-filling articles about Chavs to show how amusing the working classes are.

What are typical "Dav" names?

David and Thomas.

Where can we see "Davs"?

Everyday in the Daily Mail of course, generally opposite the editorial but sometimes next to the feature about kittens who look like Hitler.

What does a Dav look like?

They are prematurely bald and wear designer glasses.

How common are "Davs"?

Not at all common. They went to Eton and are furious that they are not quite as rich as Wayne Rooney.

Do "Davs" wear big checks?

No they carry them to the bank.

© Daily Thomas of the Daily Mail

THE WORLD'S WORST COLUMNIST

Let's Stop Knocking Kimberly!

Writes Max Hastings

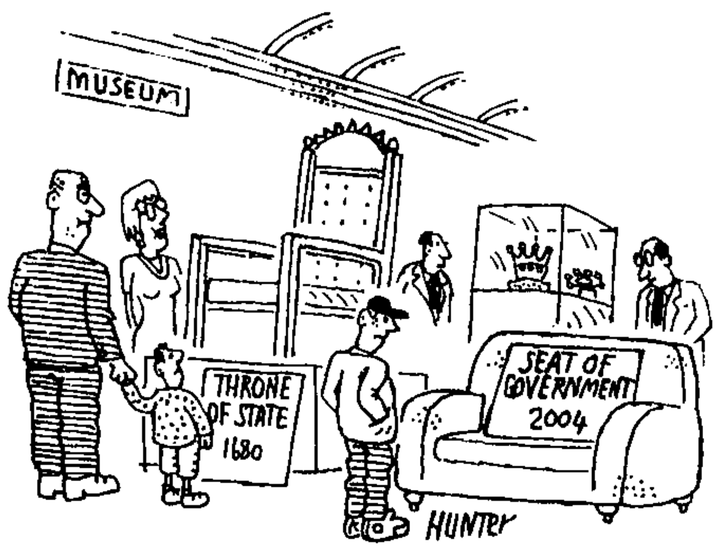
WHY has everyone got it in for Kimberly Quinn? She's a pretty girl, who works damn hard at a very difficult and responsible job. And her only crime is that she wants to have a little fun.

So what's so wrong with that, I ask?

Have we turned into a nation of killjoys and prudes?

Are we so sanctimonious that a beautiful, intelligent woman in the prime of life is to be pilloried simply because she is eager to enjoy life to the full?

I say this. If I weren't getting on a bit, I wouldn't myself say no to *(cont. p. 94)*



Playtex said women had complained a strap connecting the two cups of the Deep Plunge Clearly Daring bra broke while it was being worn.

The company blamed tearing in fabric connecting the bra cups, and said "less than a handful" had been affected.

BBC News on Ceefax

Ephraim HARDUP

I AM reliably informed that everyone has gone away between Christmas and New Year and there is no one left in town. Is this why, I wonder, I have nothing to write about in this column? Isn't life grand?

MY PICTURE shows someone on television. Yet I notice that there is no story attached to the picture other than the fact that the person in question is on television. Strange indeed? What can be the explanation for this? Could it possibly be that I am so desperate for items that I have been reduced to putting in photographs of minor celebrities simply to fill up column inches. Curiouser and curiouser?

GUESS what? The author of a well-known newspaper diary column has, according to my informants, been given a rather extraordinary Christmas present. A trouser-press no less. And why? Sad to say history does not relate, but could it be that Ephraim Hardup has *(You're fired. Ed.)*

POETRY CORNER

In Memoriam
Cyril Fletcher

So. Farewell
Then. Cyril
Fletcher.
Famous poet,
Comedian and
Star of
"That's Life".

"I've got a
Cutting for you,
Esther."
Yes, that
Was your catchphrase.

I have a
Cutting here that
Says "Cyril Fletcher
Has Died".

That's Death!
(My odd ode
For this
Week.)

E.J. Thribb (17½)

DIARY

AMANDA PLATELL

Don't get me wrong.

I've nothing against the Queen.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

Like many attractive, high-achieving women in their early thirties, I regard her as a role-model.

If she can do it, then so can we.

Okay, so she may have more cellulite than you've ever seen in your life.

Okay, so we may want to beg her not to wearing a skimpy thong the next time she ventures onto a sun-soaked beach in public.

But that's not the point at issue, is it?

No. The point at issue is that she's the best monarch we have.

A lovely lady with a heart of gold and what's more with dignity and blueblood to match who's given her country decades of devoted service and asked for nothing in return.

So why, may this lowly subject ask, can't she be more satisfied with her record-breaking achievements that have put her face firmly on the celebrity map?

Why must she always be hell-bent on craving more and more publicity?

Not content with insisting that her face should be seen on all our hard-earned stamps, the little lady with the big influence just can't say no to posing day in day out for oil-portraits, photo-shoots, the lot.

It doesn't take an idiot to see what she's up to.

She says it's for the good of the country.

Yeah, right.

In truth, it is now certain that she'll stop at nothing to be a contestant on the next "I'm a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here!"

I find it sad – deeply sad – that a woman who's been a hallmark of respectability throughout her long career as Queen should be forced into competing with a singer from Westlife and an actress from Hi-de-Hi for the chance to eat a plateful of witchetty-grubs in the Aussie outback.

So – please, ma'am – this loyal subject is pleading with you to claw back at least some of your dignity.

Leave the topless tantrums to the C-list has-beens.

Stop trying to prove yourself.

And – for god's sake, ma'am! – *start acting your age.*

Walking in London's West End the other day, on the look-out for something to express my deep concern about, I noticed a staggering number of shops on either side of London's famous Oxford Street.

Not just one shop.

Not just two.

But literally hundreds.

Don't get me wrong.

I've nothing against shops.

Just so long as they don't defile small children, bring shame to the elderly, or contribute to underage pregnancies.

In fact, I use them all the time.

In my opinion, shops are truly superb places to buy things from.

Haberdashery. Luxury Goods. Beauty items. Electrics. Foodstuffs. Wine and Spirits. Something for the kitchen.

A seasonal gift for a much-loved Uncle or Auntie. Hi-fi equipment. That tempting box of violet cremes, gift-wrapped. A classic book to read by the fire on those long, dark winter nights. A trendy shirt for the man in your life. A bottle of wine, red or white, depending on your preference. A pair of fashionable shades for that luxury weekend break. Findus Crispy Pancakes for Two. A trampoline for the youngsters. Costly lingerie to make you feel that little bit special.

All of these items – and many more – can be bought in shops.

But – *for crying out loud* – do we really have to have so many big shops all together in Oxford Street?

Wouldn't it be fairer to spread them about a bit?

Selfridges on Salisbury Plain.

Marks and Spencer halfway up Mount Snowdon.

Top Shop in the Mull of Kintyre.

Wake up, overweight Home Secretary Charles Clarke – and act now to relocate these prestige stores, before it's too late!

It's not that I dislike Charles Manson. Far from it.

I've nothing against Americans with long hair.

And it's no secret that a number of my ex-boyfriends have been blessed with beards!

There's nothing a girl likes more than a nice bit of stubble scratching her erogenous zones! Tell me about it!

But what I frankly do object to about Charles Manson is the way he murdered innocent people.

Sadly, that's not nice.

Not nice at all.

It's one thing to sing old hippy songs and live in an "alternative" community.

But it's quite another thing to break into luxury A-list homes and brutally slaughter all the inhabitants.

That's truly something I can't forgive. Not today. Not tomorrow.

And not the next day, neither.

Sorry, Charles, but if you had pursued a career in music, I would today be applauding you.

Or if you had employed your undoubted skills as a group-leader to more constructive effect, I would be taking this opportunity to salute you forgiving something very special back to the community, just like the late, lamented Princess Diana.

But sadly, Charles Manson is no Princess Diana.

Far from it.

I'm sorry, but in my opinion, he's nothing but a seedy mass-murderer languishing on Death Row in a high-security prison, his reputation in shreds.

And – while we're about it – that's exactly where self-styled terrorist Osama bin Laden should be too!

I'm sorry, but he should.

So don't ask me to spring to the support of Charlie Manson – because I won't. It's against my deepest principles.

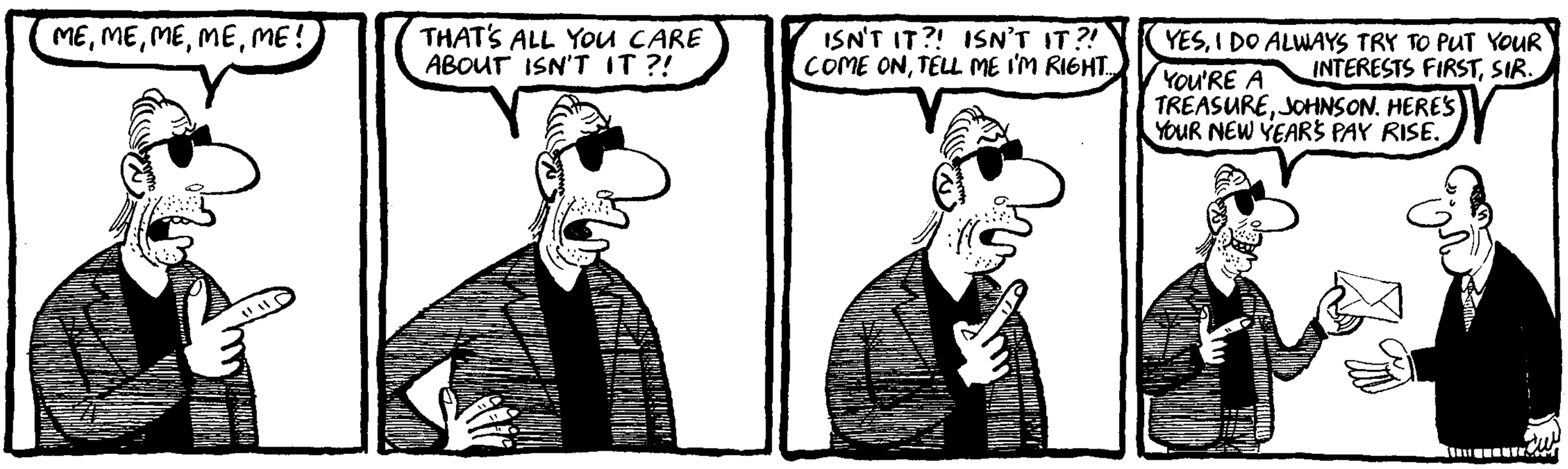
Even if the guy does have the sexiest blue eyes, dammit!!

As told to

CRAIG BROWN

Celeb

LIGGER


ME, ME, ME, ME, ME!
THAT'S ALL YOU CARE ABOUT ISN'T IT?!
ISN'T IT?! ISN'T IT?! COME ON, TELL ME I'M RIGHT...
YES, I DO ALWAYS TRY TO PUT YOUR INTERESTS FIRST, SIR.
YOU'RE A TREASURE, JOHNSON. HERE'S YOUR NEW YEAR'S PAY RISE.

● *"Craig Brown is our greatest parodist. In his new collection, Imaginary Friends , his eye has never been keener." – Christopher Matthew, Daily Mail* ●

Literary Review

Green unpleasant land

State of Fear
Michael Crichton
(HarperCollins, £17.99)

WELCOME BACK, my friends, to the world of the American blockbusting novel, full of green-back-flashing plutocrats and moist-eyed gym bunnies just back from their aerobics work-outs, where poor people don't exist, even the security guards have security guards and subtlety, poise and character just took a walk downtown to the liquor store.

State of Fear, which is, *inter alia*, the kind of enterprise in which the leotard-clad babe, finding her boyfriend paralysed on the floor, murmurs "Did you have a stroke? You're too young for a stroke. But that could happen, I guess. Especially with your diet. I told you no more than sixty-five grams of fat a day", has all this and more. What makes it even worse, alas, is the dogged – uh – *iconoclasm* of its message, so relentlessly and woodenly expounded that the fictive world bidden to sustain it crawls haplessly away to the earliest of premature deaths.

Peter Evans, our put-upon hero, is an inoffensive nice-guy lawyer, working for a philanthropic Croesus named Morton. The latter's charitable good works extend to the multi-million dollar support of such institutions as the "National Environmental Resource Fund", with its weaselly director Nicholas Drake ("a solitary, ascetic man who detested parties and noise") and, everyone hopes, a lawsuit got up on behalf of the people of Vanatu, whose island may soon be swamped by the tides let loose by global warming. All is this called into question by the arrival of John Kenner, an MIT professor turned underground agent, whose intelligence gatherers swiftly connect the NERF to a regiment of eco-terrorists known as the Environmental Liberation Front.

Already suspicious of flakey Mr Drake and his machinations, Morton turns up drunk at a charity fund-raiser in his honour, makes a rambling speech in which he announces his intention to cut off the funds, drives off in one of his vintage Ferraris, tumbles the car over a cliff and vanishes, presumed dead. Evans and Morton's PA Sarah Jones ("as glamorous as any movie star") are instantly hustled off around the globe as professional supercargo on Kenner's mission to stop the ELF from launching such publicity-catching stunts as blowing a chunk off the Antarctic ice-cap and contriving flash-floods in an American national park. In the course of these shenanigans, lawyer and gopher are flung down crevasses and half frozen to death, struck by lightning bolts and subjected to many another of those Yankee thriller substitutes for spending quality time together.

Interspersed with these serial accounts of Kenner's resourcefulness, expertise and so on – he is, in fact, a corking bore who can't dish out an aspirin without descanting on its restorative properties – come a whole stack of lectures on environmental issues, all done in the form of question-and-answer sessions between Kenner and his sidekicks and their dumb fellow-travellers, all retailed in tones of maximal smugness and all designed to cast doubt on the kind of eco-reporting that you read in the newspapers. No, sea levels aren't rising at all, apparently. Forest fires are actually good for giant redwood propagation as they help distribute the seeds. As for global warming, the whole is thing is presented as something only slightly below the level of a conspiracy dreamed up by a bunch of vainglorious earth scientists with the aim of raising funds and scaring the public.

Needless to say, all this has been eagerly disputed by certain sections of the scientific community. The Earth Centre at the University of Columbia, where Crichton did some of his research, has already drawn polite attention to various "red herrings" and the "misleading and selective recollection" of public statements by experts in the field. Somehow, though, all this is less offensive than the moral compass that twitches belief. Whisking around in the succession of private jets, snowtracks and what have you, constantly rescued and resuscitated and struck dumb in the presence of male capability, Sarah is quick to frame personal judgments. Kenner is "so knowledgeable, so skilled". Peter, on the other hand, "was a nice guy, but...". Happily our man soon establishes that "there were bad people in the world. They had to be stopped". Subsequently Sarah is pleased to note that his voice has "lost its boyish hesitancy. He was no longer protesting everything Kenner said. He seemed older somehow, more mature, more robust..."

Reader, let's go out and *kill* something! And so this nasty little sub-Hemingway morality play scampers on to its conclusion. The NERF gets its come-uppance, and Morton (inevitably) returns from the dead to explain that his absence was the only way of confounding the baddies and announce the foundation of a new environmental group, minus "one of those pretentious names with the words *world* and *resource* and *defense* and *wildlife* and *fund* and *preservation* and *wilderness* in them". Crichton contributes a lavish "Author's Message" whose final sentence is that "Everyone has an agenda. Except me." One would mark this down as irony, had not this desirable quality been conspicuously absent from the preceding 572 pages.

Books & Bookmen

■ READERS may be interested in *Soulmates: Understanding the True Gifts of Intense Encounters* by hypnotherapist Sue Minns, to be published in paperback by Hodder & Stoughton in February.

For it offers one particular "step on the path to opening your heart and mind" which catches the eye.

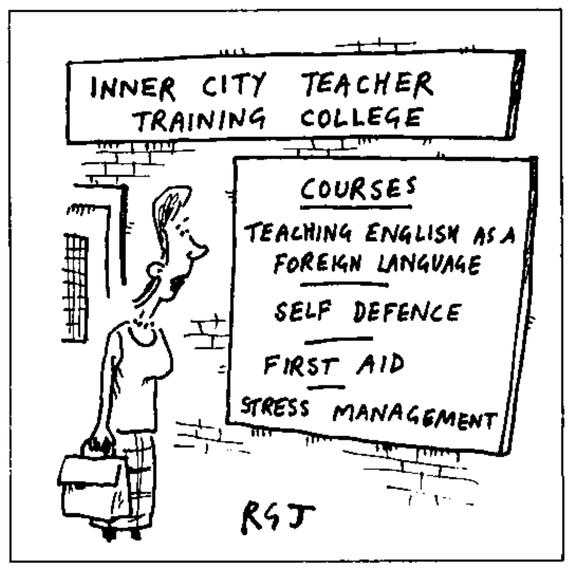
"The 'Brillo Pad' Soulmate" is, according to Minns, present "in everyone's life, whether it's the nightmare neighbour, possessive mother-in-law, the difficult or demanding brother or sister, or a bullying boss. The abrasive, or even abusive, behaviour directed towards us by these soulmates is really a blessing as it makes us assess our own behaviour and analyse why these people treat us badly."

Those who find it difficult to imagine how such a relationship might function may find the illustration helpful...

High Principals

PROFESSOR Gerry McKenna, vice-chancellor of the University of Ulster (UU) is clearly feeling the strain. Days before Christmas staff received an email informing them that their leader, on sick leave for the previous month, was off on an apparently open-ended sabbatical.

At the start of the academic year McKenna sent an email to all 3,500 university employees, ordering them to stop gossiping about him: "Some of you will be aware that there has been speculation, much of it misleading and inaccurate, in regard



to my personal life... such comment is not in the interests of the university, which is more important than any of us."

At least 90 percent of the staff had no idea that there *were* any juicy rumours about their boss's personal life, but thanks to the email all of them, plus 20,000 students, soon caught up.

Prof McKenna next found himself in the sights of a community "save our pool" campaign after announcing the closure of the university's diving and hypnotherapy pools at the Jordanstown campus, which was used by, among others, a local special needs school. Campaigners are challenging the decision through the courts.

Meanwhile, students are unhappy with McKenna over the decision to charge them £80 to use the campus car parks or face clamping – which led in turn to a huge local row over on-street parking.

After a term like that, a sabbatical probably seems like a good idea.

SEASONAL shopping can be a stressful experience. Tempers flared when senior law lecturer Dr Fareda Banda, of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (Soas) got into a heated dispute over her credit card.

After a row with a shop assistant at the Afribilia store in Bury Place, Dr Banda was asked to leave the shop and barred. So determined was the lecturer to finish the argument that the manager called the police, although no charges were brought.

Dr Banda's specialist subject? "Alternative dispute resolution."

" THERE IS NOTHING BETTER FOR YOUR SENSE OF WELL-BEING THAN TO HAVE A THOROUGH CLEAR-OUT... "
lifesmart carole caplin
WHATEVER YOU SAY, CAROLE
lifesmart carole

Is that it?

Seconds of Pleasure

Neil LaBute

(Faber, £10.99)

PLAYWRIGHTS have a problem. In a market now dominated by more exciting media, the theatre struggles to assert its continuing "relevance". To grab attention, plays must set out to shock, whether the artistic requirement is there or not. And no one likes to shock audiences more than Neil LaBute.

Take *Bash*, for example: a set of three short plays, one of which treated the smart set at Islington's Almeida theatre to a gruesome blow-by-blow account of a fatal gay-bashing in a public convenience. In another play, a man assists the cot death of his own baby to improve his chances of avoiding redundancy in the workplace. The baby was already struggling under the comforter, the man tells his audience, so he took the "opportunity" of finishing her off. In LaBute's latest play, *The Mercy Seat*, a married man who should have been at work in the World Trade Center on September 11 was actually with his mistress. Why disabuse his wife and family, who presume he's one of the dead, when with one bound this bounder might be free? "On a shitty scale of 1 to 10, how shitty is your shitty feeling?" asks his sceptical mistress.

Now we have *Seconds of Pleasure*, which is presented as a collection of short stories but actually feels like a bunch of sketches for more plays – or perhaps film scripts, since LaBute has also made a name for himself in the cinema (see, for example, "In the Company of Men"... on second thoughts, don't). They are mostly very short indeed, rarely lasting more than a few pages or displaying any sense of development, and generally consist of either confessional monologues or adversarial duologues revealing the selfish stupidity of boring men who risk anything for a few of those "seconds of pleasure" (mostly sexual) of the title. It's all rather depressing.

Some of these pieces have appeared in magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *Esquire* and the *New Yorker*, where presumably they helped space out the glossy ads while offering LaBute a peg on which to publicize his latest plays and films. Collecting them does them no favours. Some display that old-fashioned virtue of a twist in the tale, but whatever his skills as a dramatist, LaBute is no prose stylist. His written work looks clumsy and infelicitous on the page. But at least his tales are shocking, or try to be.

The problem is, how far can you go? There are things you can get away with in a book, such as the porn film-maker's gleeful recounting of the gang-rape and murder of a crack-addled black prostitute for a video nasty, in "Ravishing", which might be difficult to do full justice to on stage or screen. Yet by including this story, with its supposed "moral" twist (just press rewind and the poor bitch comes to life again), LaBute sets himself a high threshold of shock value, which reduces the impact of a story like "Maraschino" about a woman seducing her long-lost dad, and makes a story like "Full Service", about a man trying unsuccessfully to chat up a girl in a motor workshop, rather small beer by comparison.

Even "Wait", about a man lying in his apartment anticipating the moment when a prostitute will come and piss all over him for $50, fails to arouse more than merely routine disgust. As with many of the other stories, it just feels like one of those exercises writers use to get over their block, or to get their creative juices flowing. In "Look at Her", a man at a party stares at a woman he fancies and eventually decides to follow her into the kitchen. "I'm a man. It's a party. Anything can happen." We are left to guess what, if anything, does actually happen. If we can be bothered to. In "Loose change", a wife discovers the perfect circle imprinted on his wallet by her erring husband's oft-hid wedding band. This might work well as a scene in a film about, say, marital infidelity. But, even when rounded off with a perfunctory bit about her hammering her fists hysterically against his car window, it doesn't amount to a story. It's just a scene from a story, an extract from something longer.

Both the unevenness of the seismic scale of moral shocks and the clumsiness of the prose writing are highlighted with the last (and probably least) story, "Soft Target". A man out jogging recalls meeting "one of those girls-slash-women whom he had singled out as a definite maybe and then gone in for the kill". The "soft target" of the final story's title is an actress who once offered the protagonist fellatio and anal sex in his garage. Quite what is meant by that infelicitous "girl-slash-woman" is made no clearer by reporting that, while they cavorted in a swimming pool, she had her "hand wrapped firmly round his cock-slash-balls". You begin to wish she had applied to them the sudden twist with which the story ends.

FIRST DRAFTS

Terence Rattigan

THE NEOPHILIACS

"If Iraq is the new Vietnam, then Palestine is the new South Africa." — Respect Coalition website.

"Z-listers are the new A-listers." — *Guardian*.

"Porno is the new Martini." — *CSI*, Channel 5.

"Pole-dancing... is fast becoming the new yoga." — Lastminute.com

"Twelve is the new eleven." — Film trailer for *Oceans Twelve*.

"Manchester – the new Edinburgh." — *BBC Music* magazine.

"Chrome is the new black." — *Glass Age*.

"Black is the new black." — *The Times*.

"The new black will be anything other than black." — *Scotland on Sunday*.

Pseuds Corner

He justifies the existence of paint, as far as I'm concerned.

SIR PETER HALL on LUCIAN FREUD
Independent on Sunday

The Hibs manager is a truly remarkable character. To sit in his company and talk football for an hour is to come upon the game's equivalent of a Pharisaic high pries.

GRAHAM SPIERS on the Hibernian FC manager Tony Mowbray
Glasgow Herald

Population, Space and Place
This 'Linking Transnational Migrants and Transnationalism' special issue (vo.10, no.5) adds to the debate about how transnational migrants can be most effectively conceptualised, as well as to the understanding of the complex and multidimensional spaces of transnationalism.

From a press release sent out by the publishers John Wiley

It wasn't just about giving God a good guitar sound, but showing how implausible connections might be extended into the stratosphere of the pop imagination, infiltrating the secular consciousness with something neither commercial nor cool.

JOHN WATERS on the new U2 album
Guardian

There is, in the adherence to fashion and formula, in the self-consciousness of Bono's singing of his own lyrics, a sense that the individual contributions are mediated through a language established outside the rooms in which they convene...

ibid

In western society, rock 'n' roll provides the soundtrack to what Robert Bly, after Alexander Mitscherlich, dubbed the sibling society, where adults regress towards adolescence and adolescents stay where they are. This Bly diagnosed as a turning away from the "vertical" plane of tradition and devotion towards the "horizontal", self-referential culture of the young and wanna-be young.

ibid

CONTRIBUTORS: Michael Pirie, P. Neville, Sam Carpenter, Tom Gray, Marc Gilbert, Seth Redmond.

£10 paid for all entries

O.B.N. SPECIAL

Monsignor Mark Langham, the formidable administrator of Westminster Cathedral, invited me to read at the annual Christmas celebration there last Tuesday evening. The event featured a rollcall of prominent Catholics – Chris Patten, David Alton, Rachel Billington and Cherie Blair.

At the reception before the service, Cherie wowed us all: she was lively, striking (far, far better looking than in the photos) and completely at ease with the kind of small talk that could include Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, Laura Patten (one of Chris Patten's three stunning daughters) and a tiny nun who was hard of hearing. Cherie confided that she was preparing herself for her next 'Catholic commitment': chairing a *conversazione* for the *Tablet* next month, on the subject of 'Render unto Caesar'... Most impressive of all was her performance during the service itself: not only did she read from St Paul's letter to the Hebrews eloquently, but she knew all the words to all the carols by heart.

CRISTINA ODONE, Observer

(Submitted by Peter Cook)

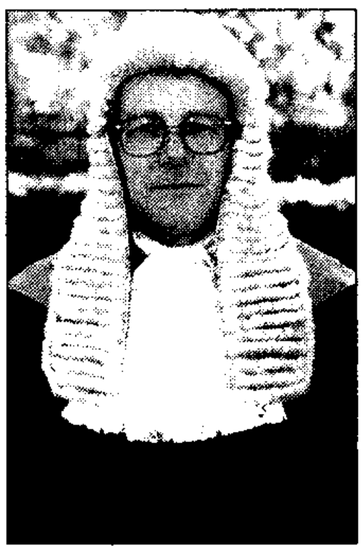
IN THE BACK

ROUGH JUSTICE

RETIRED AND EMOTIONAL

A HIGH COURT ruling last month should have made it more difficult for police officers to retire from the force in order to escape disciplinary action in serious misconduct cases.

Mr Justice Wilkie (pictured right) declared that Greater Manchester Police (GMP) had acted unlawfully when it allowed a senior officer to retire on full pension while he was under investigation for perverting the course of justice in a murder trial. The wider public interest might require disciplinary action and retirement should not prove a way out, he said.



However, just a few days later Humberside police allowed four of the five police officers caught on video laughing and chatting while black paratrooper Christopher Alder choked to death on a police station floor (*Eyes passim*), to retire on medical grounds. Although the officers, all in their thirties and forties, were cleared of misconduct charges last year, the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, ordered a review by the new Independent Police Complaints Commission after the case was highlighted on BBC's *Rough Justice* programme. Allowing the men to retire ahead of the IPCC inquiry, not due to report until the middle of the year, has prompted condemnation from local Labour MP Peter Pike, as well as Mr Alder's family and lawyers.

Mr Justice Wilkie's ruling in the case of Detective Chief Inspector Kenny Caldwell (*Eyes passim*) will, no doubt, strengthen the Alder family's case should it seek to challenge the early retirements by way of judicial review. Caldwell was accused of deliberately withholding evidence and lying during the trial of six men who were accused of the murder five years ago of a drug dealer, David Barnshaw, who was burned alive in the back of his car.

When the trial collapsed in 2001 Caldwell was blamed by the judge for concealing documents that pointed to suspects other than those in the dock. The judge said failings by Caldwell and two other officers, Detective Inspectors David Smith and Darren Shenton, were so serious he was referring the matter to the director of public prosecutions. Caldwell, the judge suggested, was guilty of "extremely serious, deliberate and dishonest conduct".

Nevertheless GMP did not suspend him until the *Manchester Evening News* kicked up a stink and revealed that Caldwell was about to retire and start giving lectures on… investigating murders! Retirement, moreover, would enable him to escape disciplinary action not only in the Barnshaw case, but also in another in which he was accused of perverting the course of justice by getting offenders to admit to crimes they had not committed so he could cook the force's crime clear-up books.

After the publicity, the force did suspend him, thus stopping his planned retirement. But after Caldwell was given a written warning over the false clear-up figures, his suspension was bizarrely lifted enabling him to retire – even though the more serious charges were still being investigated. Mr Justice Wilkie condemned the GMP move, saying police had ignored Home Office guidelines which dictated that the wider public interest might require disciplinary action and that retirement must not be a way of avoiding it.

Caldwell cannot retire out of the criminal investigation into his conduct, however, nor the civil action for damages for misfeasance in public office which is being brought by the men acquitted in the aborted trial. Humberside police, who have already been cleared of criminal manslaughter charges in relation to Mr Alder, are also likely to face action through the civil courts.

ASYLUM

Fast track to danger

HERE'S another ugly contrast between the Home Office's ability to sympathetically fast-track visa applications from Filipina nannies with influential friends, while equally quickly fast-tracking desperate asylum seekers back to dodgy regimes or dangerous conflict areas.

Unless eleventh-hour intervention by supporters and lawyers at the Refugee Legal Centre prevail, Abdul Turay – a traumatised child soldier who fled the atrocities of the 14-year civil war in Liberia – is set to be sent back to the troubled West African country.

His enforced removal is not because there is any doubt about his account of being abducted at the age of seven and being one of an estimated 21,000 child "soldiers" forced to witness and participate in atrocities for one of the warring factions. Nor was there any doubt that as a Mandingo muslim, who later joined the rebel opposition Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (Lurd), he would be at risk if he was sent back to his home in Tumanburg.

His appeal against the Home Office refusal to grant him asylum failed partly because his account of bribing guards to escape was not believed. But primarily it was refused because it was decided that since a peace agreement was reached in Liberia at the end of 2003, there been a reduction in violence in the capital, Monrovia. As Mr Turay, now 20, was to be sent back to Monrovia, the adjudicator, John Entwistle, reasoned he would not have a well-founded fear of persecution.

Yet Liberia's "peace" – upheld by 15,000 UN troops – has always been fragile and the last few weeks have seen increasing violence among former rebels in the capital (16 were killed in November) as well as elsewhere. Mandingo muslims were among the targets.

Abdul Turay arrived in the UK two years ago as an unaccompanied minor, aged 17. He has no idea where any of his family are, or even if they are alive. Agencies such as the Red Cross have been unable to find any trace of them. Those acting for him are now hoping that the Home Office will listen to the UN high commissioner for refugees, which has urged that Liberians such as Mr Turay should not be sent back. They are seeking a new hearing on the grounds that the situation in Liberia is uncertain and that his mental health is fragile. A psychiatric report from the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture said he had been diagnosed as suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression and suicidal tendencies. Last August he tried to hang himself. The report said that – as is often the case with trauma victims – he is still reluctant to talk about his experiences as a child soldier, but that he has recently disclosed that he had been made to eat human body parts to "become stronger".

Recently Mr Turay was incarcerated in the Colnbrook detention centre, prior to his planned removal, but has recently been released following representations about the effects on his mental health. So far the Home Office has not responded to the new application made on his behalf.

PFI SHAMBLES

So Laing, farewell

MUCH was made of the abandonment last month of the first-ever private finance initiative deal, the Skye toll bridge, introduced 12 years ago under the Tories at enormous cost to the region and now terminated just as expensively with a big pay-off to Bank of America.

For some reason trade secretary Patricia Hewitt chose the same week to make a written statement to the Commons announcing a similar fate for one of "new" Labour's first PFI deals, the redevelopment of the National Physical Laboratory (NPL) at Teddington. The contract kicked off in 1998 with a joint venture between Laing and Serco, called Laser, was supposed to produce fully operational facilities by September 2001. More than three years on it remains incomplete.

The DTI has finally pulled the plug on the deal by making a "termination payment" of £75m in return for assuming full ownership and responsibility for the new facilities, including finishing them off. Incredibly, even this was presented by Hewitt as a PFI success story, demonstrating "how the risk transfer principles of PFI arrangements can operate, with appropriate risks being ultimately transferred to the private sector to the benefit of the taxpayer".

In return for her £75m Hewitt maintained that the DTI has lost £73m in liabilities and gained facilities with an "insurance" (i.e. exaggerated) value of £120m. She gave no indication of how much the government has already paid to Laser, merely referring to "increased costs that threatened the project's viability". Nor did she say how much the work will cost to complete – so it is impossible to tell what kind of deal this aborted PFI really gives the taxpayer.

It is odd, though, to hear a cabinet minister echo the words of many a critic of the long-term costs of PFI as she cited an advantage of cancelling this PFI contract as "cash savings from fees that would otherwise have been made in payment for the new facilities between now and 2023". To show there are no hard feelings, however, the NPL will continue with a support services contract with Serco, who will thus carry on making a nice profit from the taxpayer.

Something nearer the full truth may emerge when the national audit office finally produces its report on the fiasco later this year.

VILLAGE PUBS

See you down the Bull (dozer)

WHEN the Inntown pub company bought 18 pubs across southern England for £3.9m from troubled pub operating company Eldridge Pope last year, the name suggested that they were taking on the pubs as going concerns. But building houses in pretty rural villages is a lot more profitable than keeping a pub business going.

To the dismay of many villagers, The Bugle at Twyford, near Winchester, has been boarded up since the summer and a planning application has been submitted to turn the site into a restaurant and five houses. Plans for a "modest residential development" have just been announced by Inntown at The Tippling Philosopher in Milborne Port, Somerset.

At the Carpenter's Arms in Bransgore, in the New Forest, Inntown have applied to put nine houses on the car park, garden and play area. Locals say the changes will kill the pub – then Inntown will be able to sell it as housing.

Villagers and real ale fans are teaming up to fight the developments, but drinkers at pubs with large pleasant gardens in areas with high house prices should be wary of Trojan horses calling themselves "pub" companies.

ULSTER NEWS

INTO THE WASTE

FROM Northern Ireland comes a splendid example of how millions of pounds of taxpayers' money can be wasted, tens of thousands of pounds in dodgy expenses can be unaccounted for – yet no one is called to account!

The drain down which all this dosh was flushed was a company called Into the West (*Eyes passim*), set up with public money in the 1990s with the aim of persuading successful expatriate businessmen to invest in Northern Ireland, in particular the counties of Tyrone and Fermanagh.

For several years councillors, council officials and local businessmen were assiduous in travelling the world on ITW's behalf, trying to drum up business. Sadly they all failed: not one new job was created as a result, despite spending £2m in public money.

More than two years ago the local government auditor's office investigated ITW after a civil servant blew the whistle on alleged financial irregularities. In a damning draft report the audit office intimated that the next step might be to call in Inspector O'Knacker.

The inquiry focused on a number of points, notably the use of credit cards by company directors Joe Doherty and John McKinney. Doherty is the former head of Northern Ireland's local enterprise development unit's regional office in Omagh; McKinney is former chief executive of Omagh district council and was later chief executive of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

Thousands of pounds of debt were incurred on ITW directors' credit cards, often in the course of foreign travel, but the inquiry found few receipts were kept. Following the audit investigation Doherty lost his job. McKinney was suspended from the SEUPB over another matter and ultimately resigned.

To the puzzlement of many, the eventual auditor's report that was released was far more charitable than the draft. One prominent Omagh district councillor, Gerry O'Doherty, publicly called for a police investigation. The matter was referred to the police by the Northern Ireland department of trade and investment (DETI), but police decided it was not their job to initiate an investigation. It was up to the audit office, they said. The audit office, for its part, declined to call in the police.

Several members of the public, baffled at O'Knacker's reluctance to get involved, raised the matter with the police ombudsman. Earlier this month the ombudsman's office wrote to the complainants: "The police ombudsman has received and reviewed documentation in respect of this matter and following careful consideration has concluded that there is no evidence of misconduct on the part of any police officer in relation to it. The Northern Ireland audit office is charged with policing public funding and were [*sic*] the lead organisation in this matter. After consultation with other organisations including police they declined to prosecute or request police to prosecute."

So that's all right, then!

MIS-SELLING SCANDAL

Bradford and bungling

THE LATEST big company to be exposed for prolifically mis-selling savings products is Bradford and Bingley, the bank that trades on the dependable, down-to-earth image it built up as an old-fashioned building society.

The Financial Services Authority (FSA) found that the reality was slightly less dependable: throughout 2001 and 2002 the bank sold high-risk "precipice" bonds to 6,900 customers who didn't fully understand the risks they were taking on. When the bonds went down the tubes with the falling stock market, the punters were left with enormous losses, for which B&B has already paid £6m compensation.

The £650,000 fine now imposed by the FSA reflects the gravity of the case, described by enforcement director Andrew Proctor as "a very serious case of mis-selling which was made worse by the fact that Bradford and Bingley had prior warning of the specific concerns about its record keeping". He added that "B&B's advisers sold precipice and with-profits bonds without having in place adequate systems and controls to ensure the products sold were suitable. The FSA has repeatedly stressed to firms through supervision and guidance the importance of keeping adequate records of sales but B&B failed to do so in these cases."

Such wanton disregard for customers' interests might be expected among the cowboys of the financial services industry, but a look at B&B's board shows it has an altogether better pedigree. The "senior independent" director who should have been making sure the company behaved itself was George Cox. Until recently Mr Cox's day job was as director-general of the Institute of Directors, in which role he frequently defended conduct at the top of big British business. Mr Cox's abilities in ensuring fair play in financial matters are also currently employed on the supervisory board of Euronext, the European company that is poised to acquire a central role in the financial markets by taking over the London stock exchange.

B&B's finance director is Rosemary Thorne, for whom the revelations of woeful record-keeping will be particularly embarrassing. Ms Thorne also sits on the financial reporting council and the financial reporting review board, the government-backed accountancy regulators that try to, er, make sure that big companies' books are in order.

HOSPITAL PRIVATISATION: FOLLOW UPS

Scan-dal?

FURTHER to the last *Eye*'s account of problems with the mobile MRI scanning service provided to the NHS by private firm Alliance Medical, responses to a survey of members of the Royal College of Radiologists (RCR) make interesting reading.

Comments from RCR members received up to October frequently complained of poor service, inexperienced staff, a refusal to handle difficult cases, late or missing reports and increased costs for hospitals rather than savings.

Radiologists at one hospital reported "major problems" with one machine which gave false readings; when the readings *were* correct, Alliance's radiologists in Belgium and Spain often wrongly misinterpreted the results.

The report says Alliance are only taking on simple scans, leaving the NHS with the hard work and major costs. Some hospitals reported Alliance would not take patients under 18 or over 70. In the Shropshire borders there is a Welsh waiting list and an English waiting list, as Welsh patients are excluded from Alliance scans. At one hospital patients who could not climb on the table unaided were rejected because its hydraulic lift did not work. Scans are coming back late. At one Midlands hospital Alliance promised reports within 48 hours, but the first came back three weeks late with most taking a further four weeks. One Home Counties hospital reported that of the first 165 patients scanned, Alliance only returned 95 reports so "there had been complaints about patients going to follow-up appointments without scans or reports". Another Midlands site reported that half of the first 510 referrals "were returned without scans being done, with explanations of little significance or no explanation at all". And so on.

The Royal College of Radiologists told the *Eye* that they "had been made aware of difficulties in the introduction of mobile MRI services under the Government's programme". It said its report was "an anecdotal overview" which "has not been verified". The Department of Health conceded there had been "some initial problems" but described claims of a six week turnaround time for scans as "nonsense". No patients were being excluded because of their age, it said, and "all radiologists working on this programme are appropriately qualified".

PS Alliance is chaired by former Tory cabinet minister Malcolm Rifkind and part-owned by Bridgepoint Capital. Shortly before Alliance won the NHS scanning contract, Bridgepoint employed former health secretary Alan Milburn as an adviser on £30,000 a year.

Private Eye?

WHEN the *Eye* contacted the South West Oxfordshire Primary Care Trust (PCT) to ask them about the Finnamore Report, the NHS-commissioned review of the Trust's purchase of private eye operations, they responded that they were "satisfied with the contents of the report and aware of the potential risks" and would "work to bring the benefits of patient choice" in the area.

The "risks" stem from the fact that Oxford's own NHS eye hospital may "become destabilised" leading to "poorer services to patients" as operations are shifted to a South African contractor, Netcare (*Eye* 1122). The truth is that, far from being "satisfied" with the report, the board's members had never actually read it. It was neither distributed to board members nor discussed at a board meeting. The *Eye* asked the trust if this was true. The response was: "The Finnamore Report will not be going to a board meeting for discussion and we are not adding any further comments."

While PCTs are theoretically powerful NHS bodies, their board members are unelected. The NHS appoints them, so they are expected to do what managers say. Many of the original members resigned when the private eye op scheme was bulldozed through, as they felt powerless to resist a decision they knew to be wrong.

Fred Hucker became chairman when academic Martin Avis resigned. On his appointment a press release said he had a "successful career in private industry" offering a "wealth of experience". In 1993 he took over Irish transport firm Bell Lines. Four years later the firm collapsed into liquidation, leaving hundreds of dockers out of work and destroying millions of pounds of investors cash

In the City

THE NEW YEAR resolution of Labour MP John McFall, chairman of the Commons treasury select committee, should be to call immediately for the chairman and chief executive of the Financial Services Authority to appear before the committee to explain why they should not resign over the humiliating £194m compensation deal they have accepted largely to settle the split capital trusts scandal.

Some 50,000 investors lost an estimated minimum £600m in "splits" – £300m in investments which the FSA itself termed "relatively secure" and "lower risk". Victims who invested in the FSA's "relatively secure" zero preference shares will now receive 55 percent to 80 percent of their money back, hopefully by the end of this year. Those who invested in income and capital shares will receive no compensation. Total losses for all shares and all investors including institutions has been estimated at more than £6bn.

"Oh dear, trip over a crack in the pavement, did we, sir? Why not come and seek our advice on making a claim..."

But the deal excludes maybe up to a third of the victims, investors with three major "splits" promoters – fund managers BFS, Exeter and BC – plus brokers Teather & Greenwood. They will get nothing unless the FSA can achieve what it has so far failed to do and force this "can't pay, won't pay" group to offer more than nominal compensation.

The compensation settlement signed on Christmas Eve, when most of the City had already closed down and media attention was guaranteed to be minimised, is a humiliation for the FSA in general and its chairman Callum McCarthy and chief executive John Tiner, both of whom have talked big, especially before McFall's committee, but failed miserably to protect investors in the 120 "splits" sold between 1997 and 2001.

McCarthy must now regret telling the committee last June that the FSA had discovered "collusion on a very substantial scale… which brings the market into disrepute". The FSA has not only totally abandoned any such claim against the 18 banks, brokers and fund managers involved in the settlement but made no finding of any regulatory breaches against anyone and as a result has exacted no fine or penalty.

All of which hardly equates with the treasury committee's demand in 2003 that redress for investors should "go beyond simple compensation for mis-selling. Very severe penalties would be appropriate. A number of people in a number of firms may have been involved in serious wrongdoing".

Well, if so, they and their employers have escaped any meaningful punishment, with the possible exception of Aberdeen Fund Managers which has ponied up the biggest share of the compensation bill – £78m – leaving £116m to be divided among the other 17 signatories. Bankers HSBC, ABN Amro and UBS are estimated to have chipped in a generous £30m in total. Yet they sold £6.626bn worth of "splits" shares in 49 trusts including those managed by Aberdeen, Exeter and BFS. The broking, banking and underwriting fees these issues generated could well have reached £100m, so £30m still leaves them substantially in profit – unlike their clients.

Brokers Brewin Dolphin are to pay £5m. It raised £1.1bn in eight trusts and probably made at least £11m in fees. Collins Stewart, who lead the charge against the FSA, raised £3bn in 23 trusts including five that failed. In-house CI Income raised £69m. The usual broking fee was one percent so "splits" could have generated at least up to £30m. Collins Stewart earned £20m from its investment trust activities in just 2001. They are to contribute £10m.

Then there are the "very severe penalties" demanded by the MPs that have been agreed to by the FSA. Aberdeen fund manager Christopher Fishwick has agreed not to work in the financial services sector for seven years. Fishwick left Aberdeen and the City in 2002 and is anyway unemployable. David "Dotty" Thomas, inventor of the modern "splits", has agreed to retire at 71 (he had effectively already done so in 2003 when he left Brewin Dolphin) and drop his appeal against an FSA ban. He, too, was unemployable.

David Keen and Alan Kerr have agreed not to apply for FSA registration to work in the City for a year. Keen retired from Morley Fund Management in 2001 and has not sought registration since then. Kerr, formerly at Legg Mason, has been happily working in a non-regulatory capacity since 2003. As with Fishwick and Thomas, no finding of guilt has been made against either man and no one has admitted any wrongdoing. So much for "very severe penalties".

The FSA failure can entirely be placed at the door of its overly ambitious but under achieving chief executive John Tiner. McCarthy only arrived after the "splits" bomb had gone off under his predecessor Sir Howard Davies. Tiner, however, was asleep at the wheel in his previous job as director of consumer, investment and insurance. He has had personal charge as chief executive of the compensation fiasco which saw a series of empty threats, extended deadlines and reducing expectations (£275m, no £235m, no £200m) culminating in the Christmas climbdown.

Tiner will whine that the FSA had legal problems because it did not take over regulating the City until 2000 and was not anyway responsible for "splits" – that was the Department of Timidity & Inaction. That is no excuse for being bullied by those he is supposed to regulate. On his first appearance before the Commons committee in October 2001 Tiner saw no reason to do more than maintain a "watching brief" and remarkably considered there was "little evidence that private investors had been mis-sold shares in split trusts". Subsequently the FSA launched its biggest ever investigation with 660 staff and outside consultants reviewing 780 files, 27,000 taped telephone calls and 51,000 records.

A year later the FSA's own website was still confidently advising investors that "one investment, zero dividend preference shares, has in the past been described as relatively low risk. This has been seen as suitable for consumers who want to save for known commitments, such as school fees… Zeros are lower risk than the other shares in splits". By November 2002, £366m had been lost in the zero shares of failed "splits" while £301m had been lost in the zeros of struggling trusts.

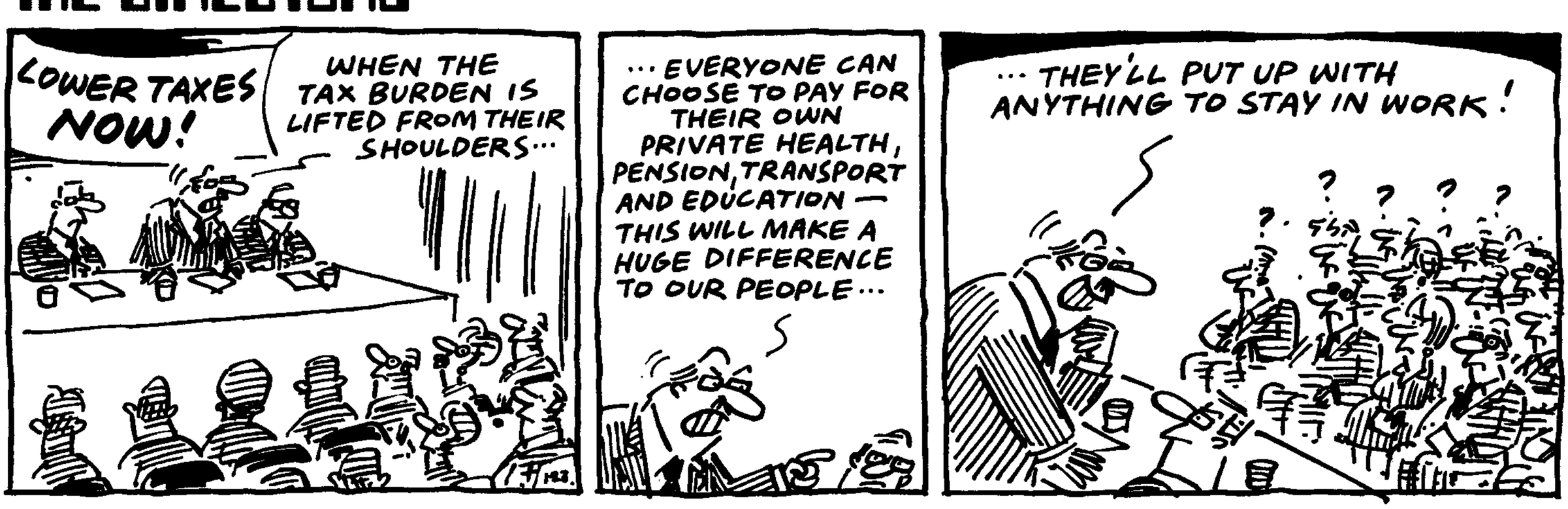
In May 2002 Tiner told the MPs only a "handful" of fund managers had colluded to prop up their splits' share prices. On BBC radio's *Money Box* in June 2002 Tiner said he did not think that gearing for splits was dangerous, did not agree that cross-holdings were high risk and did not accept that splits were too complex for the general public. No wonder regulation failed.

Called before the committee again in October 2002 the future chief executive admitted the FSA had not been "deeply interested" in "splits" during the 1990s because investment trusts were not regulated by the FSA. "There may have been a gap in the regulation", he conceded. A gap through which investors were allowed to pour more than £8bn!

He also denied that the FSA had been warned by the Guernsey regulators in January 2001 about the growing risks in "splits". Guernsey was a base for a number of "splits" promoters including Collins Stewart. Called back before the committee in November 2002, Tiner claimed he was unaware of the Guernsey letter.

Since his pathetic performance Tiner has been keen to talk tough with those responsible for the "splits" scandal. So the FSA indicated in May last year that £350m would be "acceptable compensation". It told the 22: "The FSA believes the misconduct in this case and especially the impact it has had on the financial services industry as a whole to have been the most serious it has seen." Ten of its 11 principles of business had been flouted. "Significant financial penalties" were promised, even for those who settled.

Despite such posturing, the guilty – or as the FSA would now have it, not guilty – 22 promoters offered just £120m. This was rejected as unacceptable by Tiner who has now effectively accepted £143m in new money. Aberdeen had already agreed to pump £43m into its Progressive Growth trust while another £7m was being paid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Stock Horror

by 'Bruin'

Fallen Dame

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...in the next five **– £13 bn**

by other firms in already agreed compensation.

So nine months of regulatory bluff and bluster produced just £23m more than the bad guys offered for openers and they have made no admission of liability which could open them to civil action from any investor who does not accept the FSA deal, face no regulatory criticism, paid no penalties and seen none of their employees banned from the City.

Compare that and the £194m with the treatment meted out by New York attorney-general Eliot Spitzer to Wall Street since he began his campaign to clean out capitalism's very own Augean Stables in 2001 while the FSA was fiddling and the "splits" crashed and burned. Backed by the Securities & Exchange Commission watchdog no less than $1.4bn (£750m) was extracted from investment banks for self-enriching research and bribing big customers with hot new issues. And a staggering $2.9bn has now been collected for market timing (quick fire in-and-out trades) and late trading abuses from mutual fund managers. The latter was made up of £609m in compensation to investors, £428m in civil penalties and £482m in reduced future fees. Invesco alone paid £230m – more than the 18 "splits" promoters combined. There were seven other settlements of more than £50m each with Bank of America paying £169m. In addition five of the fund managers responsible were given life bans from the securities industry and another eight forced to resign.

That is why Tiner must go. He talked the talk but could not walk the walk. He is nowhere near value for his near £500,000 a year salary. As a result the City's only regulator – the FSA is from this month supposedly the one regulatory shop that stops all – has suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of spivs in suits. Now everyone knows how to deal with the FSA. Call its bluff, threaten legal action, promise untold delay and it will blink. Regulatory capture is there for the taking while John Tiner is in charge. That is the message McFall should deliver. If Tiner will not resign the Treasury should sack him unless it wants a Fundamentally Supine Authority.

THIS YEAR'S awards from the Gnome Institute for Greed Management are:

Crook of the Year – Jeff Greenberg, former chairman of the world biggest insurance broker Marsh & McLennan for screwing clients by bid rigging and directing premiums to those insurers who paid undisclosed "contingent commissions" worth a whopping £460m in 2003 alone.

Newcomer of the Year –Chen Jiulin, chief executive of now bankrupt China Aviation Oil Singapore for mimicking but not excelling Nick Leeson by hiding almost £300m in losses on oil derivatives.

Comeback of the Year – Robert Bonnier, fined a record £290,000 by the FSA last month for manipulating the price of office providers Regus. Before riding Scoot into the sunset while at Swiss Bank Corporation Bonnier traded shares of clients of the bank.

Escapers of the Year – the guilty 22 of the "splits" scandal.

Suit of the Year – Sir Philip Watts, arrogant former chairman of Royal Dutch Shell, forced to quit after the company admitted it had overstated oil reserves by some 20 percent… or a mere £100bn.

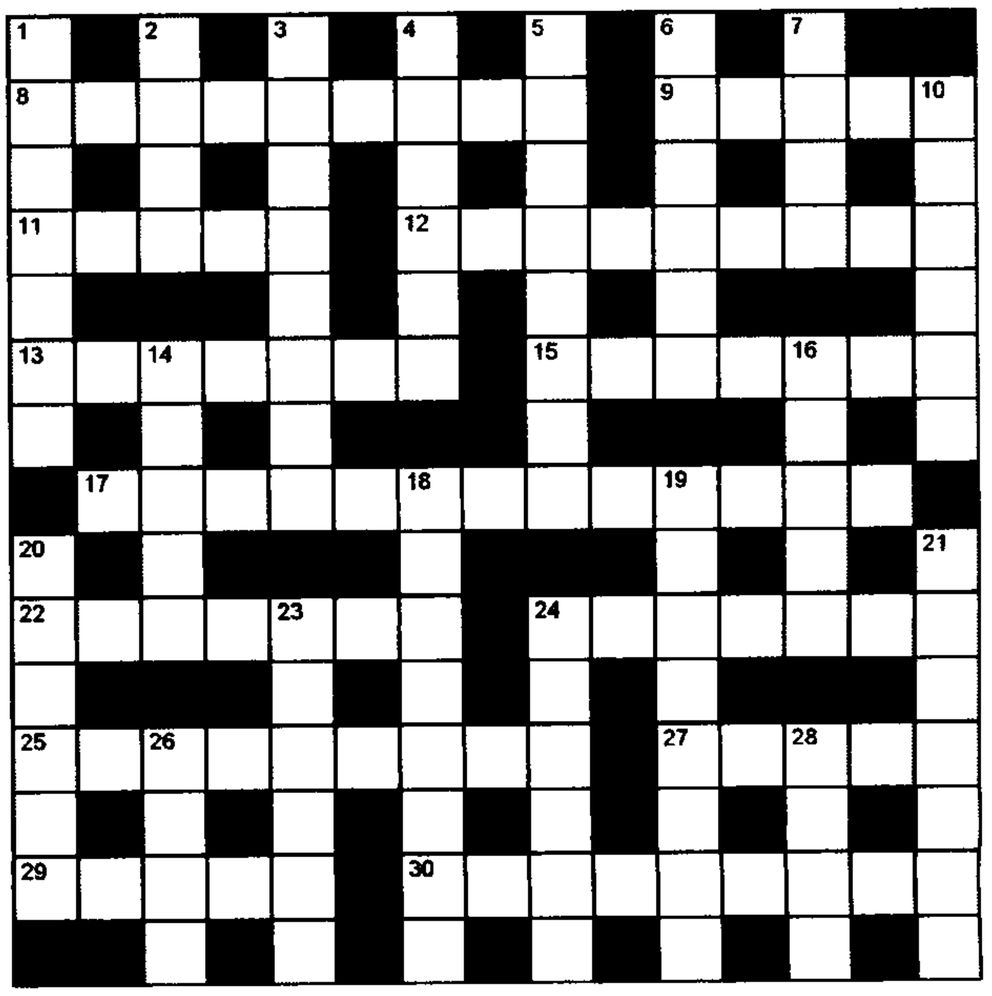
'Slicker'

EYE CROSSWORD 278

by Cyclops

£100 prize to first correct solution opened on 14 January 2005.

Entries to 'Crossword', Private Eye, 6 Carlisle Street, London W1D 3BN or via email to crossword@private-eye.co.uk



ACROSS

8 New Dior range that gives a 'wet look' to some visitors to USA (3,6)
9 Settle back, chat and instigate an erection (3,2)
11 Short street cabbies not best disposed to PC language (5)
12 Takes courage, having pud pulled and not given release (7,2)
13 Republican stronghold giving John the edge (7)
15 Bush needs to get end away before meeting leaders of Irish-American republic (7)
17 Blunkett's exposed – party activity more or less out now (9,4)
22 Stupid old Cyclops faces having to get drink in (7)
24 Couple gobbling Conservative man's chopper (7)
25 They're good for the spirit, Wonderbras (9)
27 The thinking man's thing: lots of girls in chest-revealing tops (5)
29 Understood Bill's in Bristol (5)
30 Portable support for arse, member's base and shaft (9)

DOWN

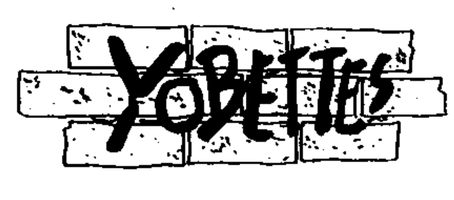
1 Wimp Ray loses heart, collared by windy cabby (7)
2/7 Stud with dash and mighty organ has date looking askance (4-4)
3 Horn's change of political direction in voting (8)
4 Not up to appearing in *Sun*? A blessing! (6)
5 US military prison "child's play" with no getting strung up (8)
6 The theatre presents a test of public opinion when there's sod all on (6)
7 See 2
10 Lombardy pro lap-dancing? (6)
14 Labour forced here to fall behind after Livingstone's centre united briefly (5)
16 House got over Clarke's last clanger (5)
18 Perhaps USA sees Maggie primarily as a manipulative female (8)
19 Retreat before whip's retaliation (8)
20 Figure 1: "Get in shagging position" (6)
21 Kate sadly accepts each leader of Conservatives could well get a toasting (3,4)
23 One National Front nerd's lost head – cracking up (2,4)
24 Bad luck, Amis's novel about heroin getting pulped initially (6)
26 See 28
28/26 Ben's work, earning him lots of money – for jam? (8)

Crossword 277 winner: BRIAN PEARSON

ACROSS: 13 Sweetener 14 Mueddin 15 Damp squib 16 Sit-upon 17 Tantric 18 Murky 19 Shiva 20 Licence 22 Cottoned on 23 Special 24 Bolshevists 26 Michael Portillo 29 Affluence 31 Retreats 32 Boom-bust 35 Self-evidence 37 Storm in a teacup 39 Open-handedness 41 North America 43 Play safe 45 Boo-hooed 46 Nostalgic 49 Sensationalized 51 Thingumajig 53 Orchids 55 Big spender 57 Terence 59 Keats 60 Trews 61 Rompers 62 Instead 64 On the spot 65 Awnings 66 Bad habits.

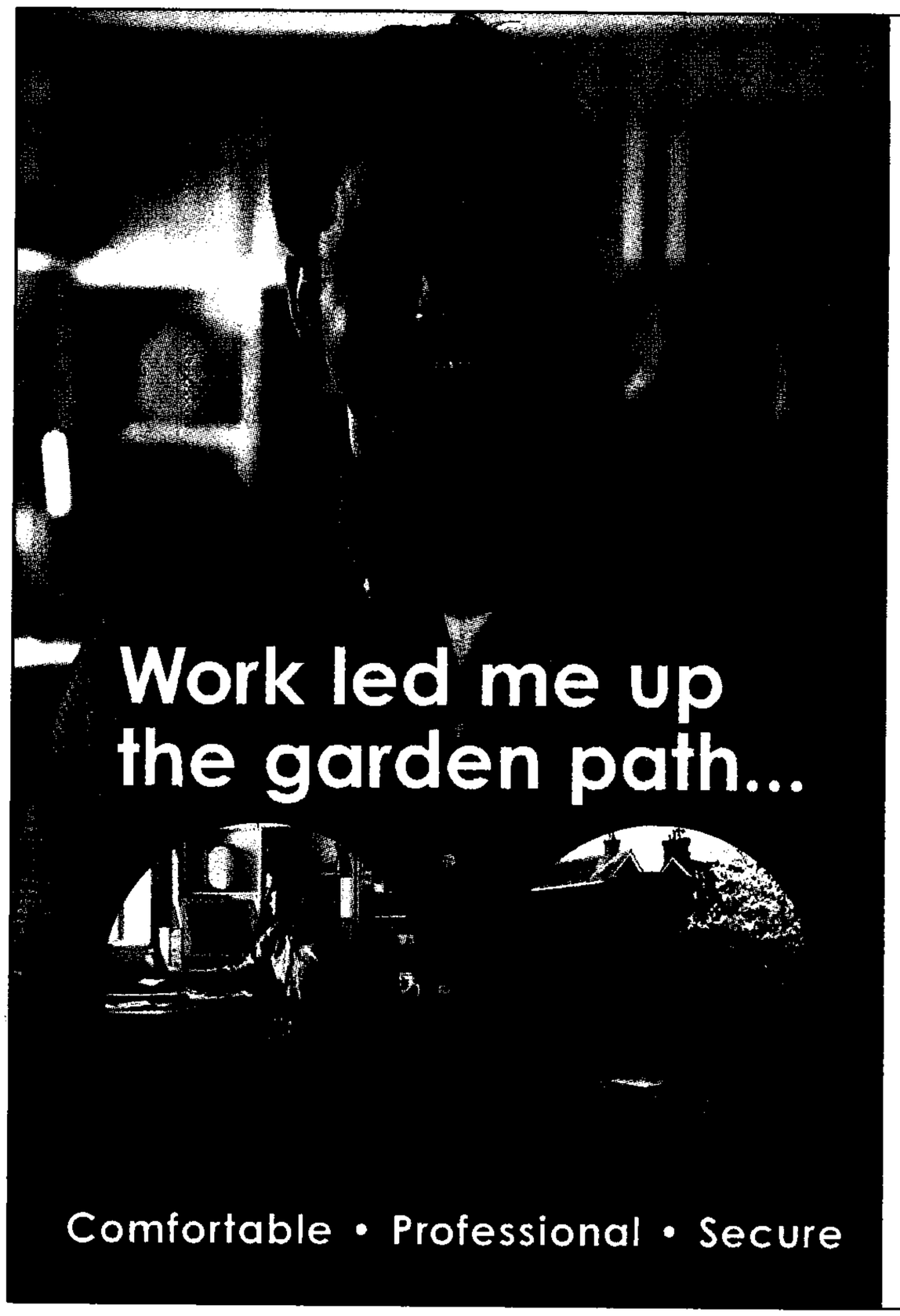
DOWN: 1 Sceptical 2 On tap 3 Non-intervention 4 Rarity 5 Humungous 6 Cherry tomato 7 Medicine chest 8 Unnamed 9 Enduringly 10 Samey 11 Jesus wept 12 Houdini 21 Nehru 23 Slovo 25 Skewered 27 Afterword 28 Launching 30 False dawn 31 Rock 'n' roll 33 My eye 34 Fitting in 36 Ethos 38 A Passage to India 40 Schizophrenia 42 Folding money 44 Fails 47 Aimer 48 In absentia 50 A bit steep 51 The Jet Set 52 Junketing 54 Coal tit 56 Gas mask 58 Usable 60 Topic 63 Scalp.

Perimeter words: THE COMMUTERS / E J THRIBB / PAUL FOOT / HP SAUCE / GLENDA SLAGG / APPARENTLY / HACKWATCH / PETER COOK /HOM SAP / YOBS / WARBALLS / PSEUDS CORNER



HUSBAND

Oh groan... my head, bleedin' New Years party.. oh..
mum... mum!!... can you make me a coffee.. black
If you want your mum luv, you'll have to shout louder than that



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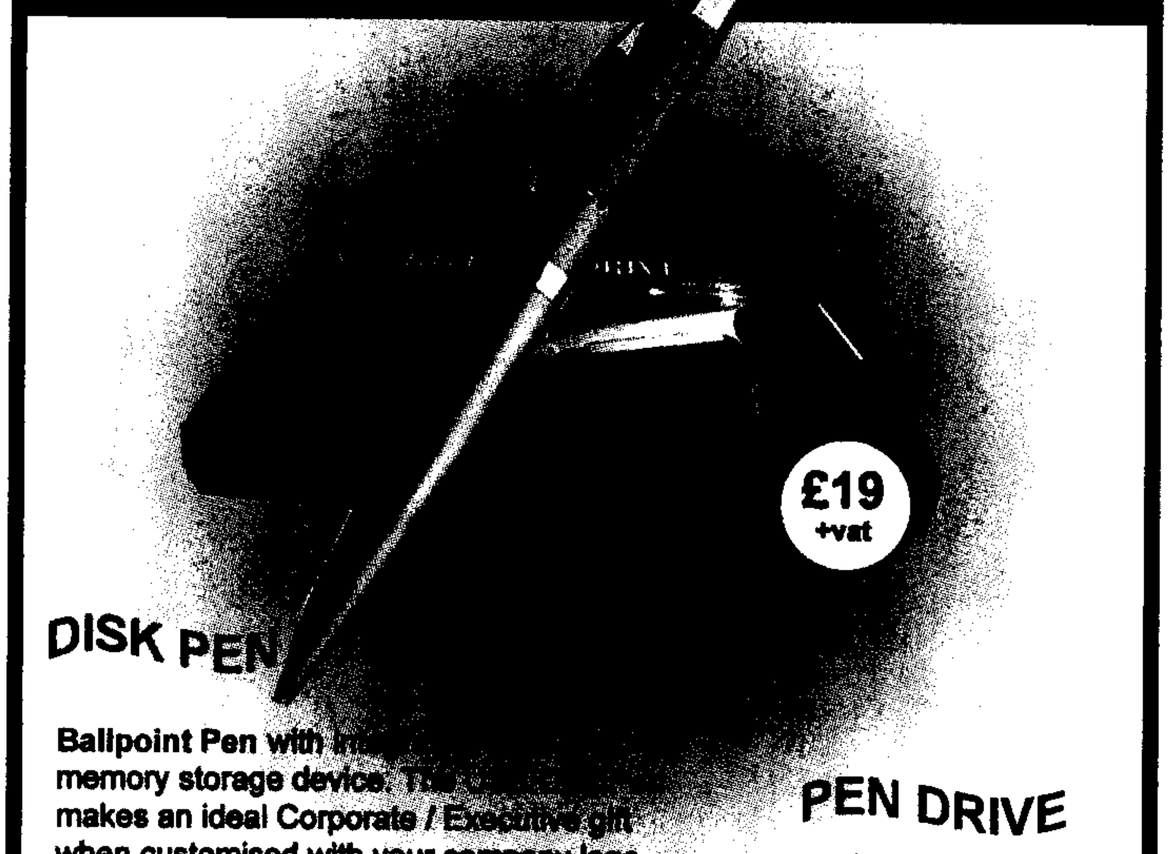

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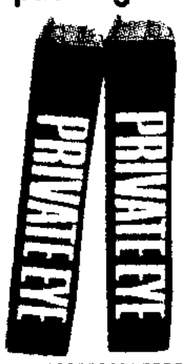

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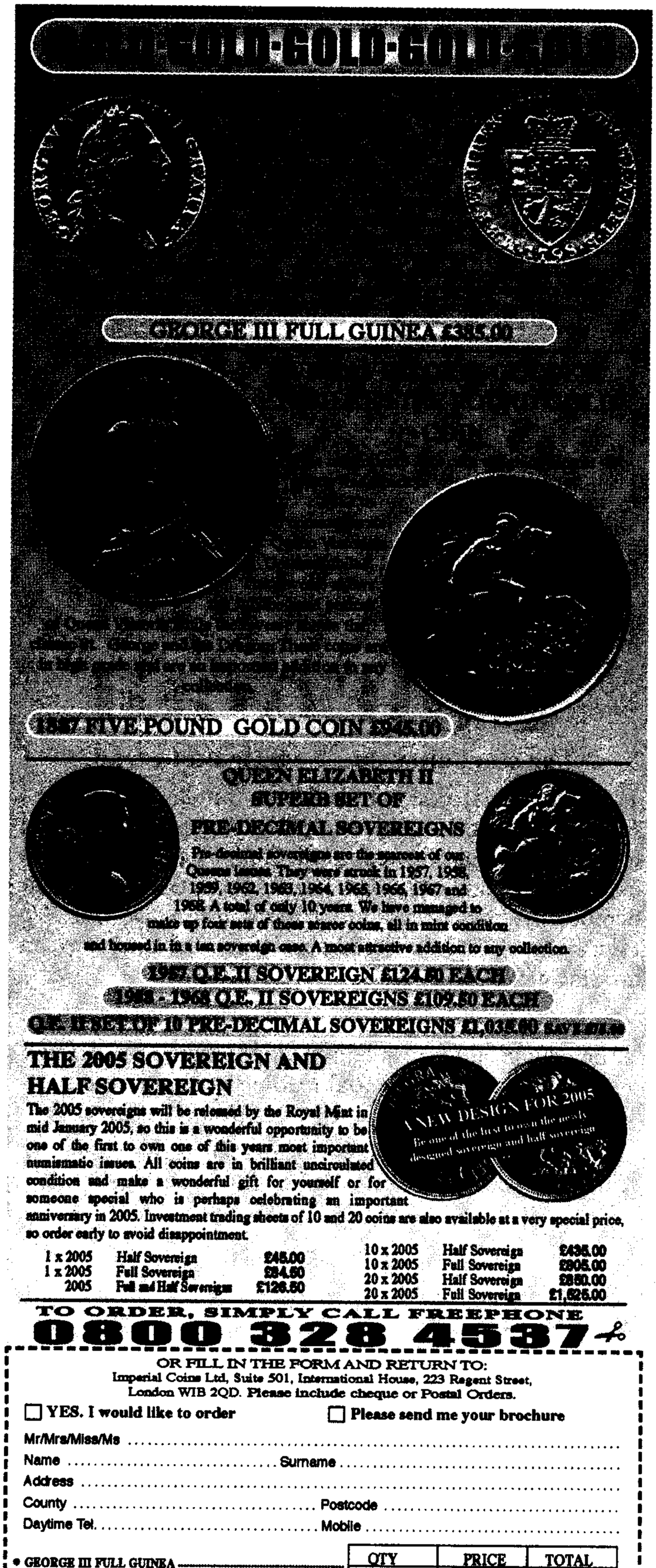
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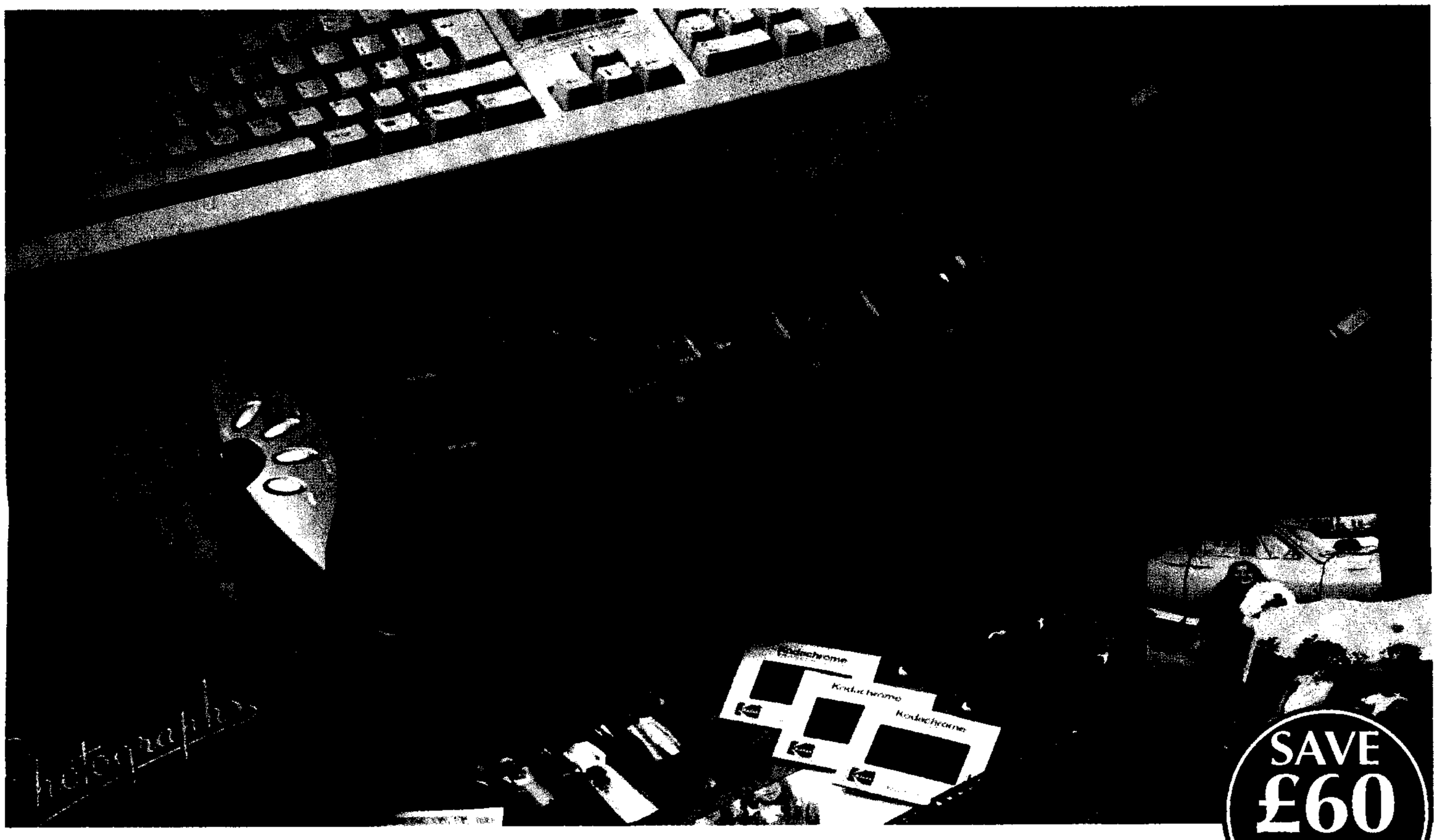

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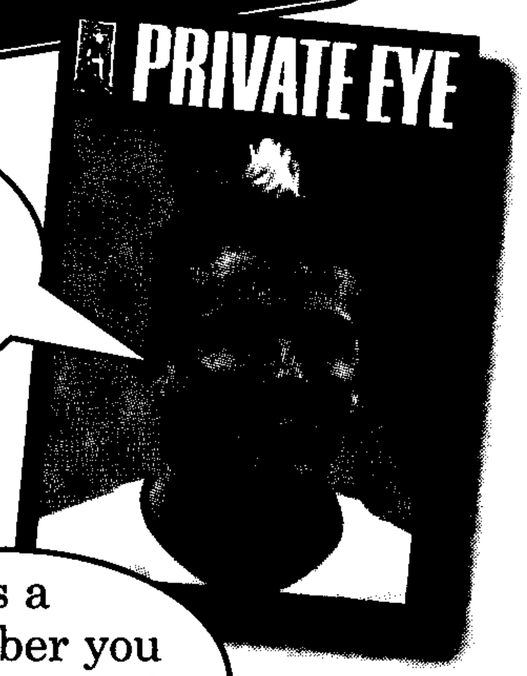

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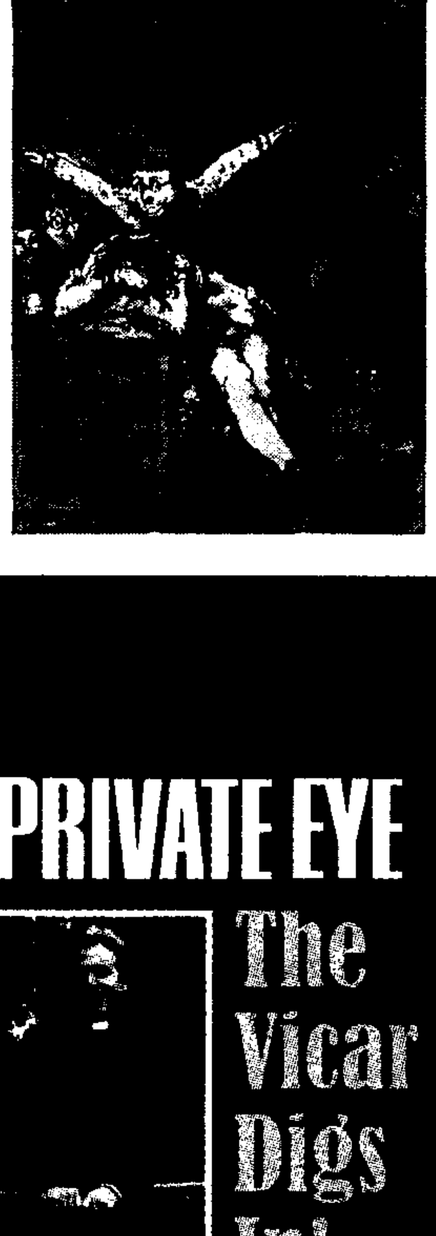

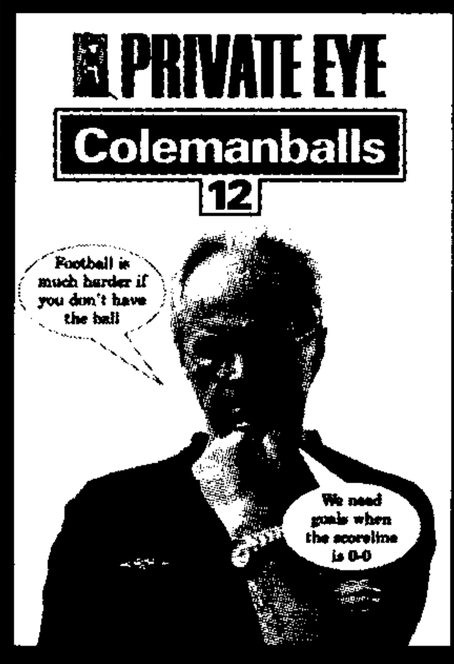

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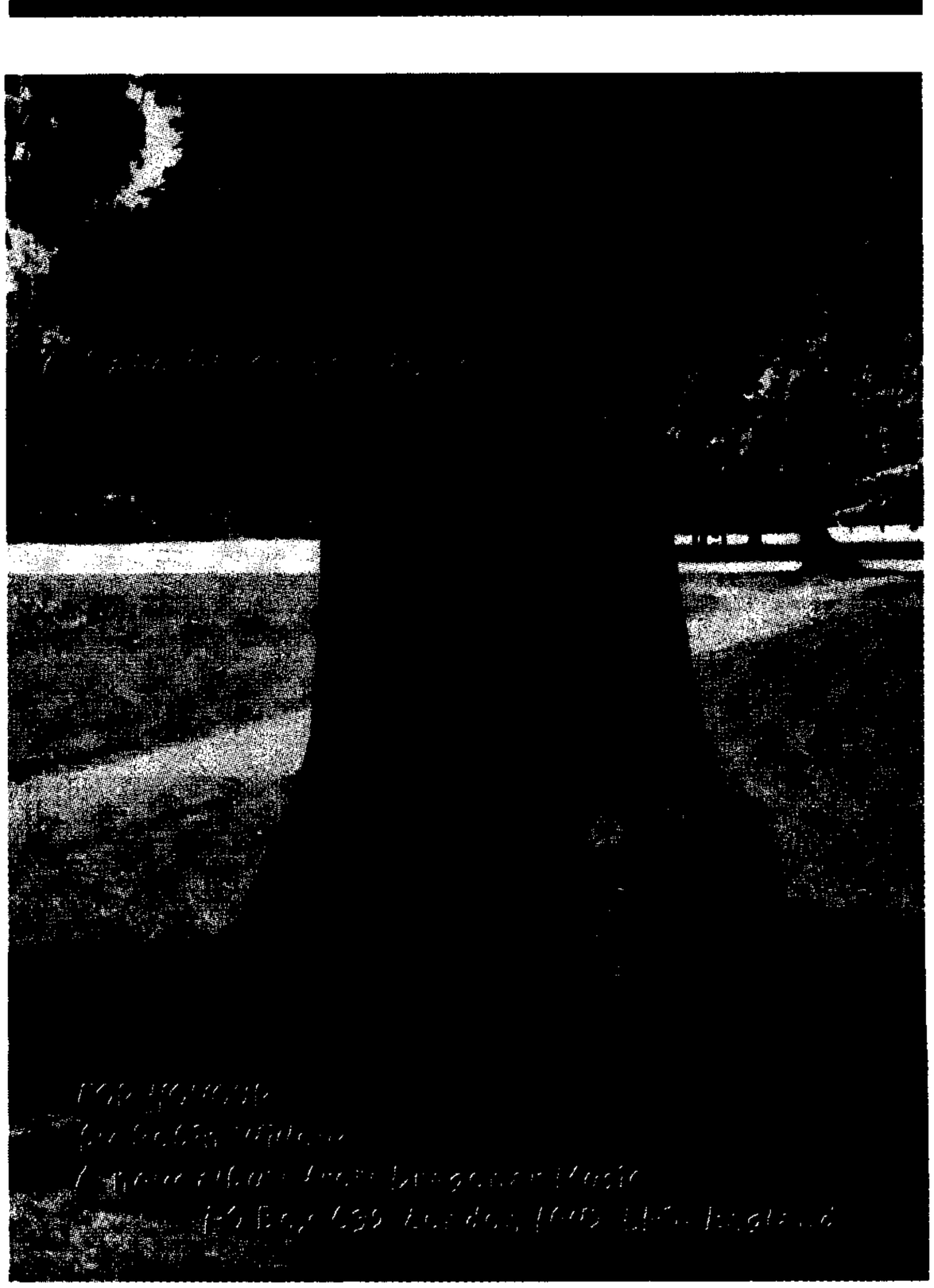

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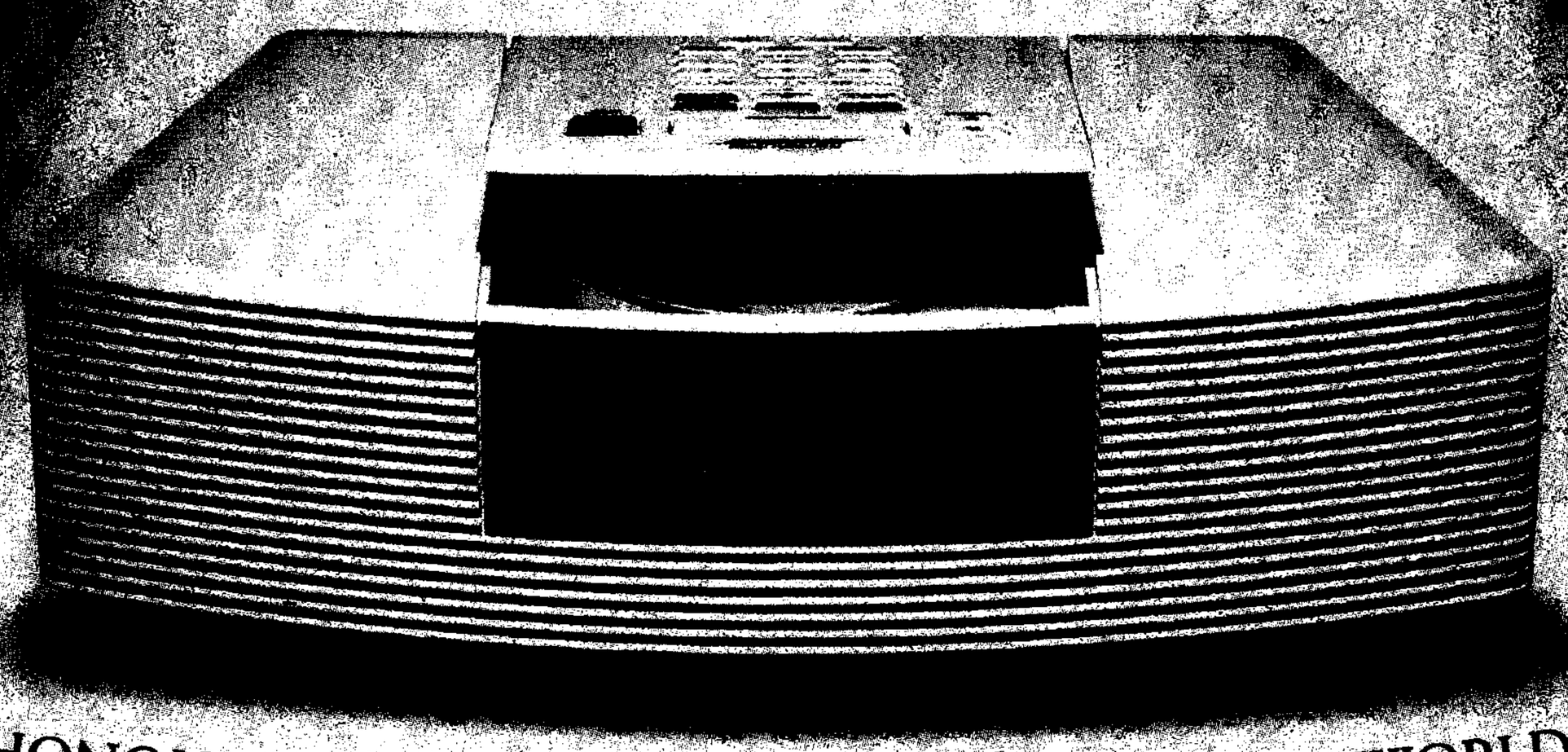

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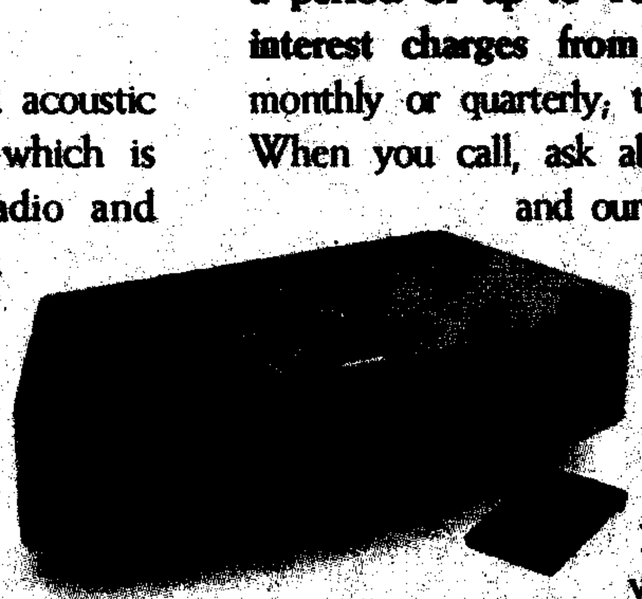
The WAVE® radio and WAVE® radio/CD are available directly from Bose, one of the most respected names in sound. Call FREE today and learn more about our instalment plan which lets you make **4 equal payments, over a period of up to 10 months, with no interest charges from Bose.*** Pay either monthly or quarterly; the choice is yours. When you call, ask about **free delivery**† and our **FREE Multimedia Pedestal** offer when you order by **31 January 2005**. The Multimedia Pedestal transforms your system into a versatile audio centre with connections for your TV, VCR and DVD player. Our 30-day, in-home trial guarantees your satisfaction. You really have to hear one for yourself. So call today. Because the proof is in the listening.



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The WAVE® radio/CD and WAVE® radio are available in Platinum White or Graphite Grey.

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